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Blessed Unrest

In his new book, Paul Hawken looks at the history of the environmental movement and predicts its future.

By Elizabeth A. Evitts

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Paul Hawken has always been ahead of his time. In 1966, he co-founded Erewhon Trading Company, the country's first natural foods business. Later he launched several successful sustainability-focused companies, including the garden-tool boutique Smith & Hawken, often cited for its environmental awareness. Hawken continued breaking new ground with several books on socially responsible business. His 1993 release *The Ecology of Commerce* went on to become a cornerstone of business-school curricula.

In his new book, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came in to Being and Why No One Saw it Coming* (Viking), Hawken deciphers the history of the environmental movement and predicts its future. Contemporary environmentalism, he argues, is nothing less than the fruition of a long global uprising to reclaim basic human rights. The book's May release will coincide with the launch of a website, Wiser Earth, an open source social network with a database of more than 100,000 organizations. Recently Elizabeth A. Evitts talked to Hawken about the book, contemporary environmentalism, and how designers are playing a pivotal role in its evolution.

In *Blessed Unrest* you go back to the start of the environmental movement. You analyze Emerson and Thoreau, bring us through slavery and abolition to Civil Rights and the impact of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. What inspired this approach?
My work involves giving a lot of speeches and after every one people would come up, ask more questions, and give me their card. Over the years they just piled up until I had literally a huge shopping bag of business cards from nonprofit organizations. I began to wonder how many groups there were. It's amazing; you just assume somebody knows. But nobody does. So I began to ploddingly try to figure it out. As I did so, I discovered that there were more than 100,000 (there's in fact over a million, but at the time I only thought more than 100,000). I started to wonder how this compared to other humanitarian or social movements, both past and present. And I couldn't find anything comparable to

it. Then the question was: where did it come from? The easy answer is, well, it's recent or it's Earth Day. But it didn't work that way. It was like pulling a string on a flour bag that went on and on. It was fascinating to see that there is this history that we don't access. Or if we do, it doesn't include the idea that there is a cumulative movement of humanity that wants to address the suffering of other forms of life, and specifically now, ecological degradation, economic disease, political corruption, and all of the cascading effects of that. I was surprised at how broad, deep and ancient it really is. What's happening now is it's spreading like crazy.

Thus the subtitle of your book: *How the Largest Movement in the World Came in to Being and Why No One Saw it Coming.*
Exactly. Climate change is certainly a big driver in the last few years, but there've been others—poverty, water issues, environmental refugees, war. The other driver is modern communication technologies, which allow groups to organize more easily. Smaller groups can have a much bigger effect than they could have prior to the onset of the internet. They're connecting better, collaborating better, working as swarms, as some people say.

You write about how this evolving movement will look very different from movements of the past.
There's no charismatic leader, no center. It's not ideological. That's often lost in the reporting of it, because what's reported is the resistance point of a group saying, "Stop. Don't." That becomes an interesting event from a media point of view. What goes unreported is the innovation, design, engineering, and social technologies. This is a movement of ideas. And sometimes ideas don't work and you try another one and that works, and then you try and figure out how to make it work better. It's an iterative, evolutionary process. It's tens of thousands of ideas with respect to water, buildings, cities, poverty, women, education, climate and carbon neutrality. You can't sum them up because they appear all over the place. But they actually do all point north toward a very different world than the one we live in now.

You suggest that the politics of the future are really about fostering unusual alliances that revolve around ideas. Strange bedfellows—evangelicals aligning with environmentalists, for example. Are you seeing this elsewhere?
Yes. At the same time, we find out that we're not strange bedfellows. We're human beings and what estranged us is far less important and almost meaningless compared to what is meaningful now. You're seeing Wal-Mart, for example, quite authentically—and I don't care what someone else says about them—they're very committed to 100% renewable energy and a lot of other things that they have not talked about yet. Well, who would've thought it? Is that a strange bedfellow or just the American people awakening to core values that now need to be expressed?

This goes back to what you wrote about in *The Ecology of Commerce*. At the time it seemed an oxymoron to combine those two ideas of nature and business. You were among the first writers who tied sustainability to commerce.
I was and I didn't get a lot of support at the time. But this week's cover story of *Business*

Week is called “Beyond the Green Corporation” and the first line is, “Imagine a world in which eco-friendly and socially responsible practices actually help a company’s bottom line.” That’s the opening line of the lead story of *Business Week*. Fourteen years after *The Ecology of Commerce* was published. When it was published, not a single business publication here would review it. It was reviewed, by the way, but editors wouldn’t publish the reviews.

Why did it take so long for American business to catch on?
They saw it as a threat: “We have a business to run and this is the government’s responsibility.” This is the same businessperson that would vote against the government doing anything. They would offload the responsibility, they had a very narrow sense of responsibility. It was to the bottom line, to shareholders. “If we obey the law than that’s all we have to do.” That has pretty much been abolished.

In the book you write that green, safe, livable cities are at the fingertips of architects and designers. What do you mean by that?
In the last fifteen years, architects and designers and planners have come up with an array of design technologies. They have started to put them together in ways that drastically reduce the footprint of the city, making it safer and much more livable. The reason you’re not seeing it sooner is simply the way that cities evolve. They’re not clean slates. You don’t just erase a city and put a new one where it was. The rate of change is not as fast as the rate of technical and design innovation. Design is a technology, but you can’t just fix things with technology. You need people who see the world in a different way and then put it together in new ways.

The book talks about the U.S. Green Building Council. You reference architect Edward Mazria for his Architecture 2030 project, which aims to make all buildings carbon neutral by that year. Sometimes it feels as if the industrial design community is the last design discipline to catch on to the idea of sustainability. Why?
The last to catch on are clients, the manufacturers. Look at Ford. They went and designed a green factory, that’s great. They didn’t change the cars that were coming out of the factory and they got walloped by sales, the stock market, energy prices. They had it upside down and backwards. They should have gone to designers for green cars first.

How would you counsel an industrial designer on navigating that conversation with clients? How do they make the case for sustainable design?
When you’re a designer you can be no better than your client. But you’re always in the job of educating them, and part of that education is about perception, costs, positioning. It’s about the future. Are you designing for yesterday, today or tomorrow? The idea of tomorrow has always been the slate, brushed aluminum projectile—if you could take something that was blocky and clunky and make it look like it could be a suppository, than somehow that was supposed to be great design. That paradigm really has to shift. That’s a difficult thing because we’re all kind of primitive. We’re all entranced by baubles. I’m talking about consumers now. Some of the new PDA’s and phones are brilliant—except from a materials and waste point of view they’re not. From that perspective they’re poorly designed. Here you have a system in which the designer is

supposed to reposition or redo something so that a product stands out in the marketplace, like the Motorola Razr, and he or she may succeed in that, but they're not given the full agenda, the full charge, which is: Can you design a product that will be valuable when it comes back to us as well? I remember years ago when HP was forced by pending legislation in Germany to design their printers for disassembly for reuse and recycling. They discovered that assembly time was reduced by, I forget exactly, but about 70 to 80%. A huge savings. Engineers asked, "Why didn't you do this before?" And the designers said, "Well, you never asked." The talent is there, but the question isn't there. They have to be asked to design things that fully embody what is possible in terms of material cycles, which is to say that it can be reused continuously and the value goes up. It's not just about recycling, but it's about upcycling, which is you design something, you use a material, and then when it's reused it's even more valuable than it was before.

You write that it's time for us to have our Rosa Parks moment, to have someone refuse their seat on the bus so to speak, and upset business as usual. You actually mention Ray Anderson of Interface.
Yeah, I said, maybe he's the one in hindsight. We don't know. Rosa Parks wasn't seen at the time as precipitating a whole movement. But there were women before her as I mention in my book who did the same thing and nothing happened. Then something did happen; there was a convergence because of Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy. A whole bunch of things converged at that point. Whether Ray is that person is for history to decide looking back. But certainly in terms of understanding, comprehending, and then meticulously implementing it piece by piece throughout his company, Ray is definitely a leader.

You designed many of the tools and products sold during your twelve years at the helm of Smith & Hawken. Your Monet bench is still the most popular outdoor bench in America. How has your approach to design changed over the years?
From a systems perspective, if you optimize a component, you pessimize the system. It's hard for people to get their arms around because we think that if you make all of the pieces better, the whole gets better. That's not necessarily true. You could say, well, every single thing in the U.S. that we use today, except for some SUVs, uses less energy. Except when you add it all up together, we're less efficient today than we were 50 or 100 years ago. To me when you design something that is good design, it's not about how it looks, it's about what it does. It will appear beautiful if you understand its total impact on the system. That's one way it's changed for me. I think of designing systems now.

How important is materials research to breakthrough products?
Absolutely critical. And there are two sides to materials research. First, there are new materials. The second is taking the materials that are everyday, plebian, and redesigning those as well. I saw a hardwood flooring design by a company in Oklahoma and it is made of the pallets that are piling up by the tens of thousands at Ford Motor Company. Owner Joy Nunn is an expert on fiber and so much of our material is fiber if it's not metallic. With this flooring, you would never know it came from ash or oak pallets. It's bulletproof, it's so hard, so tough, and you can do anything with it in terms of textures and appearance. It's like a new material. This is an example of upcycling where you're

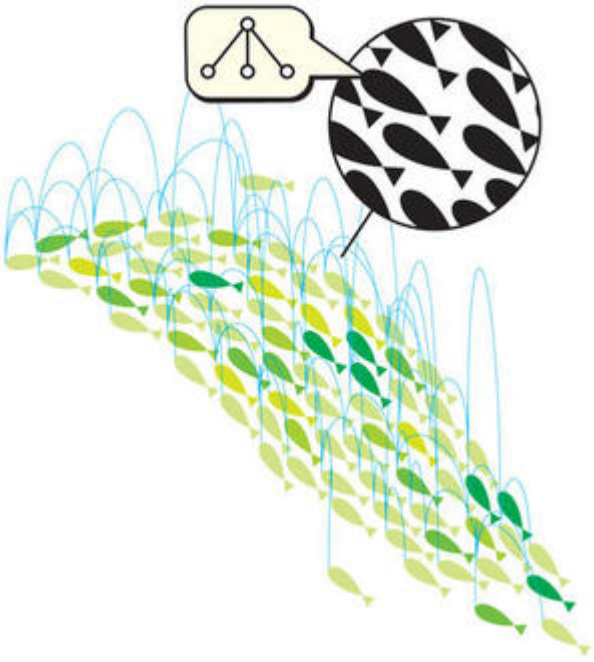
taking fairly hard but not great grades of wood, and then you're using it until it's no good anymore and then you're making beautiful hardwood flooring at a lower cost than regular flooring. It's kind of elegant.

What would you tell industrial designers about how to be more effective, more creative, while negotiating the realities of the marketplace? What resources would you suggest they tap?
I would say to go to the other design school that they didn't go to yet—nature. Go to biology and immerse themselves in biomimicry, in biomass. It's a huge field that's growing. I have a company, the Pax Group, and our work is based on how fluids flow in nature, not how they flow in a pipe, or how they're forced to flow by pumps, fans, turbines, or compressors. We've taken those flow forms and made fan designs based on them. These designs are more efficient, they save energy, they're quieter, and there is less or no cavitation in the case of marine propellers. All we've done is bow to Mother Nature, which always moves in the path of least resistance. We were talking earlier about design removing stress from the system. Well, there's a system that has the least amount of stress: it's called nature. The reason nature does it that way is because it has no choice, it has no V8 engines, no coal-fired plants. We have a motto that nature sucks, and what we mean by that is that nature always draws water or flows to it; it never pushes, never forces. And good design is never forced.

You write about the loss of the public commons and the rise of the creative intellectual commons. Much of this activity is coming from young designers who are sharing software, sharing research, sharing design. Still, the marketplace seems to foster manufacturer paranoia about being knocked off. How would you change this?
I don't know how I would change it, but it certainly is changing. There's just a different ethos arising. We're moving from a world created by privilege—which is a top down world—to one created by community, which is a bottom up world. And that's going to be true for everything—money, design, planning cities, information, politics. It's an amazing threshold that we stand upon. The rate of change right now fosters and foments the open source model, because it's evolutionary. The proprietary model is not. We're moving to a period, in ecological terms, called perturbation. One hundred twenty five mile per hour winds in Poland and Czechoslovakia last night. That's so bizarre as to be unthinkable and yet at the rate we're going that will be 160 miles per hour ten years from now. In a period of perturbation you get a rapid rate of evolution. And that's what we're going into. It is exciting, dynamic, hair-raising. It's the stroke of midnight for the rest of our lives.

You said that you went into this project not knowing how you would feel, but that you came out feeling hopeful.
Very much so. If you look at the data about Poland and Czechoslovakia and you're hopeful, then you're not understanding the data. But if you meet and hang out and see the groups and people and organizations, and watch their brilliance, innovation, and creativity and you're not hopeful, then you don't have a heart. Both are true and I put my faith on people.

Martin Lorenz/Twopoints.net



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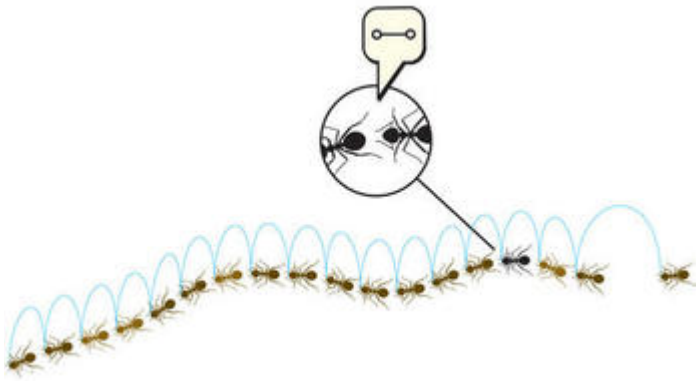

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