

WEM

Water &
Environment
Magazine

February 2008 Volume 13 Number 2

Reach for the sky

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The highly-respected American husband-and-wife team of artists, Helen and Newton Harrison, seem to bring an air of positive calm to all that they approach.

I have heard them speak about their work on two occasions and have been struck by their ability to communicate the most creative and visionary ideas in a way that both inspires and challenges in very concrete terms. These are not artists who pose questions without offering answers. These are people with backbone who face up to realities, offer solutions that blow away the confines of the norm and present new, empowering, sustainable futures.

The idea for their current exhibition 'Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom' came about at a Darwin conference they were invited to attend in Shrewsbury. At the end of the conference a delegate asked what the Harrisons would do in the UK to help deal with climate change. 'Greenhouse Britain' is their suggestion of how Britain could respond to rising sea levels resulting from climate change.

At the centre of the exhibition is a relief model of Britain on which is projected a multi-media video showing how sea level rise would impact on the country. The scenario looks at a projected sea level rise of five metres, which would displace millions of people. Moreover, their mapping research showed a loss of about 10,000 square kilometres of land.

'The ocean is a great draftsman,' explains Newton Harrison. 'It redraws the world everyday. The question was whether we could withdraw with equal grace?' The Harrisons' scenario suggests there is a 30-year window to adapt to sea level rise and they have challenged themselves with finding solutions for three watersheds - the Avon, the Mersey and the Lee Valley. What is most successful about their ideas for adaptation is that they are futuristic in their vision, but appeal to our most primal of instincts, delivering a re-engagement with the environment that has been lost, and that many would agree nourishes our soul and most basic of instincts.

'Everything is a state of continuous creativity,' explains Newton Harrison. 'It is not about systems or history. That has led us to our present state and we cannot survive like that. . . Collectively, we are genetically impaired. Unless we select differently, we will continue to extract from nature and concentrate on wealth and we will go the way of other cultures.'

Helen reflects: 'When I was young you could drink from the river. If we pollute the river it will pollute us back. When we lost our respect for the river gods we lost our respect for water. We cannot bring back the river gods, but myth has reason and we must try to bring back that respect. We need to live more minimal lives. We must rediscover a sense of reciprocity with nature. We have lost that sense of interdependence. We have made a different kind of god in technology.'

One of the Harrisons' strengths is their understanding of human resistance to change and the current state of denial amongst individuals and governments of what the realities of climate change might really be.

'You must ignore the Government's conservative estimates of sea level rise,' says Newton, adding: 'The whole idea of think globally and act locally is really an unfortunate notion because it leaves the power to act locally in the wrong hands. Those hands in the main are in the business of extracting resources and generating new markets, indifferent to long-term consequences. We believe that the activities of culture need to find their way into acting globally while, of course, not ignoring local issues. Basically, the looming question is: "How do we stop growing?"'

As poets, the Harrisons understand the importance of words. The projection of sea level rise in the exhibition is accompanied by poetry spoken by three voices, those of Newton, Helen and a British voice. Poignantly, these voices bring home the message of change and ask the questions that most do not dare to consider. The voices juxtapose Britain's climate change scenarios with those of the rest of the world,

emphasising the all-encompassing nature of the challenge:

Europe, Asia, America and the Amazon will lose 30% of their forests

we examined what a 5 metre ocean rise might mean and we were looking at about a 10,000 square km loss of land with about 2,200,000 people displaced And somebody said "Where will the people go and the money come from?" "What new forms of organization will we need?"

The poem offers a solution:

Will it be enough to construct a global consensus to withdraw from the carbon world entirely?

As the poem continues, contemplating a sea level rise of eight metres that only further serves to emphasise the time for resolution slipping away, Helen's voice asks:

Still would it be enough to begin immediately a trans-global discourse in which the Global Domestic Output is discussed agreeing all efforts be directed to commit 1% of the Global Domestic Product to the reduction of the carbon surge to near zero in order to reduce the ocean rise?

At a climatic point in the poem, as the sea level rise begins to reach its peak before retreating to a four metre rise, Newton

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Erika Yarrow talks to artists Helen and Newton Harrison about their new exhibition 'Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom.'



Image: With the assistance of Westergaard & Harrison/John Mckelvey

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reads a stanza that focuses on a theme that is at the core of their work - that of enabling the environment to work, recover and regenerate in a natural way:

*Would it be enough
to transcend economic thinking
and begin creating
a domain
of ecological thinking
that regenerates
the great carbon-sequestering
world systems
that operate in the forests
and the oceans
while leaving
ancient carbon stored
as coal and oil
in their present inactive states*

The poem concludes:

*Finally understanding
that the news
is neither good nor bad
it is simply that great differences are
upon us
that great changes are upon us as a
culture
and great changes are
upon all planetary life systems
and the news is about how we meet
these changes
and are transformed by them
or
in turn
transform them*

The Harrison's' idea of transformation in the Lee Valley Drain Basin and Thames Gateway focuses on creating an environment that will place communities in one that will sequester carbon, improve air quality and secure London's water supply, with the Lee Valley becoming a partially-urbanized trans-basin park, which could have a defence system built if water rose above the supposed five metres.

Newton comments: 'We think you are developing yourselves backwards. We are thinking forward to the forest, which will enlarge the water supply and help carbon sequestration, becoming a giant biodiversity park for London.'

The Harrison's' vision sees the Thames Gateway develop into the sky, with whole communities living in sky-rise buildings that encompass vertical high streets and hanging gardens, so allowing space for reforestation on a massive scale. Newton explains: 'We are talking about 70 or so structures that are each towns. A vertical main street is proposed. And a million people could live there without displacing the forest and disrupting the life of the earth.'

The idea of recreating communities that can engage with, rather than destroy, nature is taken to a further level with the Harrison's' vision of redevelopment in the Pennines. As an area of low population and wide open spaces, the idea is that the Pennines are used to resettle displaced communities, in harmony with the environment, so reducing the carbon-footprint of all who live there. The houses themselves would be built on stilts so that any impact on soil and water is minimised.

These communities would be situated within 2,840 hectares of open-canopy forest and 4,260 hectares of meadow land - calculated to pull 10,000 tonnes of carbon out of the environment each year. Fruit trees and bushes would be planted to provide a yearly harvest, while softwood would be available for hundred year harvests and hardwood for harvest after many hundreds of years - all adding to the biodiversity.

The meadows would be diverse, including dry and wet grasslands and species-rich pasture. Welsh Black and Highland cattle and European bison would be introduced and it is proposed that red deer and hare would also find their way into the reserve. The development would reinstate man's natural co-existence with the environment, re-establishing the notion of hunter-

gatherer. 'It would introduce a spontaneous collaboration between man and nature,' explains Newton. 'Man would have to learn not to over-work nature and it would reduce the monoculture and the monotony of the over production of sameness. In fact, the process of harvesting in this vision tunes to natural rhythms.'

This kind of co-existence of man with nature seems radical to modern eyes, used to habitation that claims its right by laying concrete and pushing nature to its boundaries. But climate change is already beginning to teach us that we can only build the walls so tall. Adaptation will only be successful if we address the balance and the Harrison's' projection suggests that the swing may be quite extreme. But, if we can do it with the grace that their visions offer, we could be rewarded with a new way of living that is enriched by nature. As Newton Harrison concludes: 'We must behave like nature and continuously create. We must think anew.'

Further information:

'Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom' is currently touring the country. Visit it at:
Darwin Festival, Shrewsbury Museums and Art Gallery, 1-27 February
Holden Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University, 14 February-14 March
Knowle West Media Centre, Bristol, 7 March - 4 April 2008,
Storey Gallery, Lancaster, Spring 2008

David Haley: Associate Artist
Chris Fremantle: Project Manager
Gabriel Harrison: Designer

For more information on the exhibition visit:
www.greenhousebritain.net

Cover Image:

With the assistance of APG Architects/A.I.M