Book Review

Henry McGhie

Robertson, M. *Sustainability Principles and Practice*, Abingdon, Routledge, second edition, 2017, hardback £112.00, paperback £34.99, ebook £27.94, pp. 398

Sustainability has shifted from a fringe activity to a mainstream consideration, in museums and beyond. Yet, what people mean by it, and what they aim to achieve by deploying the term in their work, often remains far from clear. The well-known Brundtland Report definition of sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.[1] This remains the most often used definition, developed in the late 1980s context of growing globalization and neoliberalism. The Millennium Development Goals, which aimed to set the world on a path to a sustainable future from 2000 to 2015, had some success, but little profile in the Global North. The successor programme, Agenda 2030, and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that support its achievement, have much greater traction and are increasingly used across and between sectors. However, we consistently see failings of the international community – not just governments, but all sectors of society – to honour governments' commitments to combat species and habitat loss; to address climate change; and to reduce social inequality, poverty and hunger.

Museums have, thankfully, been taking up efforts to support better futures, but it has to be said that they have been slow to embrace sustainability in a holistic way. A number of museums have made declarations of their intentions regarding sustainability. In 2019, the member committees of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a resolution 'On sustainability and the implementation of Agenda 2030, Transforming our World', to work to address sustainability issues and to take up the Sustainable Development Goals as a blueprint for action and collaboration.[2]

Sustainability Principles and Practice was first published in 2014, by Routledge. The book's focus is 'on furnishing solutions and equipping the student with both conceptual understanding and technical skills for the workplace'. The second edition is set out as a complete update of the text, to incorporate more material on the Anthropocene, complexity, resilience, environmental ethics, governance, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessments on climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals, and 'new thinking on native species and novel ecosystems'.

The first section explores the concept and usage of sustainability, the four spheres of the planet (lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere), and how humans relate to these. Part two explores 'Issues and Solutions', including socio-environmental challenges such as climate change, water availability, and ecosystems and habitat, as well as innovations for more sustainable relationships between production and consumption, for example green buildings, liveable cities, and the circular economy. The third section, 'Becoming an Agent for Change', is a combination of workplace ethics, education for sustainable development, and practical skills for advocating and collaborating for positive outcomes for sustainability.

Each chapter covers a topic by presenting key concepts, and the practical consequences or impacts relating to that topic. Examples are presented in greater depth as Boxes within the main text. Each chapter provides a short list of further reading, and a set of questions for the reader to self-test their understanding of the contents of the chapter. A further set of questions aims to develop critical thinking and discussion, again with a student audience in mind. There

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is an accompanying website aimed at students, with an additional section for educators that requires a subscription. There is a useful set of additional exercises available that could be used to inform educational activities in museums. On looking through the website, some of the elements had been decommissioned and so were not available.

To give an example of a chapter: 'Food' covers farming methods, human health issues, planetary health issues (including climate change, biofuel production, and nitrogen run-off, among others), 'feeding ourselves' through local production, urban farming, foraging, and soil maintenance. There are boxes on 'bees and other pollinators', an example of a multi-crop farm, and Cuba as an example of low-carbon farming.

Overall, the book moves very rapidly through a wide range of concepts and terms, so that it felt like a cross between a dictionary of environmental and sustainability terms, and a textbook (and rather different from, for example, the Oxford Handbook series). There are no illustrations, beyond a few graphs. As such, it has merit as an introduction or supporting text for educational programmes (notably for undergraduates) or for professionals to refer to. However, concepts are presented in a rather cursory way, so the reader would have to refer to further material to understand their nuance. For example, to say 'the Anthropocene is generally understood to have begun around 1800 CE' (24) is an over-simplification, which doesn't reflect the widespread disagreement about what – if anything – constitutes the Anthropocene, let alone when it can be said to have begun. I found some of the layout rather confusing: the end of the first chapter explores 'Living in the Anthropocene', while the end of the second chapter is entitled 'Into the Anthropocene'. Some of this confusion was a result of a rather over-detailed contents list, which gives breakdowns of chapter contents to a very fine level. This layout could have been improved if the chapter contents had appeared at the head of the chapters, rather than in the contents list.

The book has two main drawbacks. Firstly, it barely notes the Sustainable Development Goals or Paris Agreement, although these drive international governance and action for sustainable development and climate change respectively. Secondly, the book takes a rather narrow perspective of 'sustainability'. This results in a rather Whiggish history of sustainability, which takes in Robert Malthus, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, ecology and nature conservation, environmental justice, and ethics over the space of a short chapter. The book is written from a primarily US perspective, and examples are largely drawn from the US. However, even with such an approach, a discussion of sustainability could have benefitted greatly by drawing on examples from different cultures, Indigenous communities and societies, as the idea of sustainability is not a new one, but in many ways an old one, even if it was referred to by different names.

Museums and museum workers will need to have the skills, tools, concepts and language to contribute effectively to sustainability efforts. This book can help provide some of these, used in conjunction with wider perspectives and further information from other sources.

Henry McGhie, Curating Tomorrow
henrymcghie@curatingtomorrow.co.uk

Notes

1 World Commission on Environment and Development, 'Our Common Future' (the Brundtland Report), Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf, accessed 17 October 2020.

2 International Council on Museums (ICOM), 'Resolutions Adopted by ICOM's 34th General Assembly', 26 September 2019. https://icom.museum/en/news/resolutions-adopted-by-icoms-34th-general-assembly/, accessed 9 October 2020.