

Review

Mike Cook takes hope from this inspirational book which illuminates a path towards the profound transformation required to arrive at a sustainable future for the planet.

Flourish: design paradigms for our planetary emergency

Authors: Sarah Ichioka and Michael Pawlyn

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THIS IS A BOOK THAT IS WELL SUITED TO ANYONE

– engineer, architect, planner, contractor, client – who is interested to hear how we could evolve new ways of thinking and living that could secure the safe and just world we need to build. COP26 may have given us a glimmer of hope that things are starting to change, but the reality is that national governments and big businesses are simply not brave enough to initiate the paradigm shift that is needed, let alone follow it through.

In essence, the message is that we have to change our mindsets – not just yours and mine, but everyone's. At first, this seems daunting, but the authors both believe that such change can be contagious, so it is up to us to start the ball rolling.

The book sets out five themes, one per chapter, that illuminate a path of necessary transformation. It is a compelling narrative that helps the reader grasp the breadth of change needed without it becoming overwhelming. It is, in fact, inspiring. The authors talk to the reader as if in conversation rather than a lecture, and this makes it a rather personal journey of discovery through what is quite new territory for many of us.

Looking just briefly at these five themes shows how profound the changes must be:

1) Possibilism: looking back at what has made profound change happen

in people's lives helps us see how big events, like plague and war, can stimulate big change, but also that big visions, such as Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream', can start to spread inspiring and contagious ideas. We must believe big change is possible and believe in possibilism.

2) Co-evolution as nature: we need to take a fresh perspective on our relationship with nature and the planet. This means returning to the idea that we are an integral part of the natural world, not its master. This demands a new, more generous, attitude to all life around us.

3) A longer now – deep time: we have to see ourselves within a far longer timeframe than we have become used to, recognising our role in the context of millions of years of historical evolution, and responsibility to future generations far beyond those we will even know.

4) Symbiogenesis: this means changing our beliefs about our relationship with our fellow citizens and recognising that survival of the fittest is a poor

and dangerous model for our long-term future. Survival relies on a symbiotic relationship between all living things and in the long term it is through collaboration and empathy that life forms prevail. This is true of human life as much as any other.

5) Planetary health: we must rethink the measures by which we judge what is right – our living metrics. It is no secret that gross domestic product (GDP) is a dangerous master, and the authors insist that we must find new metrics to guide our regenerative development. Such measures need to be based on what we value, and what will ultimately give us and future generations the opportunity to flourish alongside nature and the whole ecosystem.

This skim across the chapters does not do justice to the depth of discourse that the authors develop, using examples from the past and the present, illustrated well and explained within the context of other great thinkers and writers.

As structural engineers, many of us have embarked on a journey to use our work to reduce the harm we do to this planet and focus on the benefits we could bring. Currently, there is a focus on reducing the CO₂ emissions that arise from our projects – the materials we use, the efficiency with which we use them, and the questions we ask about the need for new build rather than reuse. But

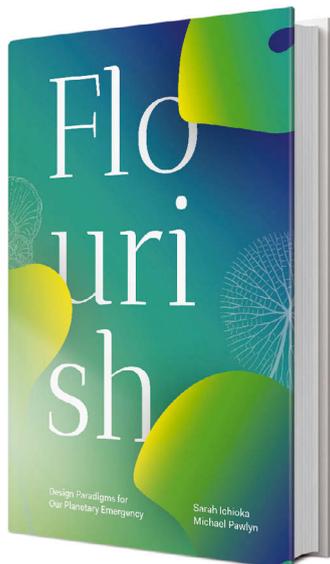
we can see that this will not be enough to create a zero-carbon construction industry, let alone to save the planet.

I think this book, alongside others, such as Kate Raworth's *Doughnut economics* and Jason Hickel's *Less is more*, does set out a way we could approach the future that rings true and feels important. I hope it is read widely and that the authors' dream of changing mindsets, one at a time, is contagious and that this will start to drive the paradigm shift we know is essential.



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Dr Mike Cook is Chair of the Institution of Structural Engineers Climate Emergency Task Group, a past Vice-President and Gold Medallist in 2020. He is a Visiting Professor at Imperial College and Chairman of Seratech Ltd, a zero-carbon concrete start-up.



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