A new heaven and a new Earth

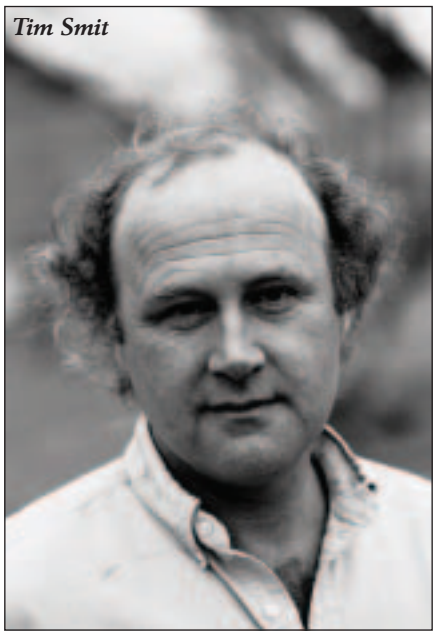
Tim Smit progressed from restoring the Lost Gardens of Heligan to building the remarkable Eden Project in a disused Cornish clay pit. When Simon Hodgson investigated his views on eco-tourism he got much more than he bargained for.

Tim Smit's PA shuffles apologetically. There has been a mix up and our scheduled interview hasn't made it into the diary. She pops upstairs and returns smiling – Tim is free and happy to chat, come on up. "It's lovely having a laid back boss", she says.

Very laid back. Sitting in his modest office in 'one of the most environmentally friendly buildings in Europe', Tim Smit is certainly happy to chat: telling yarns and expounding theories, eventually waving aside the discreet interruption of his next appointment to continue with another interesting argument. He is interested in everything, exploring connections and challenging orthodoxies. He is also studiedly informal, dressed in a crumpled denim shirt and jeans.

Smit (Dutch – he was born in Holland, but educated in England) started his career as an archaeologist, spent ten years in the music business, and then collaborated with a colleague to discover and restore the Lost Gardens of Heligan. Most recently, he has been, by turns, the Project Director and Chief Executive of the Eden Project.

The Eden Project shares many of the characteristics of its originator, embracing science, art and entertainment in roughly equal measure. It too strives for a relaxed, 'rock n roll' informality, and it meanders from story to story, but never loses its focus. The Project, best known for its photogenic 'biomes' – huge greenhouses filled with enormous tropical plants – also has a scientific foundation, an entertainment arena and some excellent local artwork, all housed in a disused Cornish clay pit.



Tim Smit

"When you were ten or eleven didn't you dream of the crater of a volcano with a lost civilisation in it?" asks Smit. "For my generation, it was adventure books like Rider Haggard. We've all thought like that. The only difference between me and anybody else, is that I then thought 'I've dreamt it, how do you now do it?'".

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The answer lay in an extended round of financing applications, feasibility studies, recruitment, and business plans. Most of us are familiar with these dry-as-dust bureaucratic mechanisms, and would assume that they are guaranteed eventually to destroy any dream. Not so with Eden: the finished product (although it is just embarking on another drive for £87m to fund another biome and extend the education facilities) is undoubtedly inspirational. It's a neat trick, being savvy enough to play the game and raise the cash, but not to sell their soul in the process. How did they pull that off?

"We're all very capitalist, very commercial, but also ethical" he explains. "The great management of systems and making a profit from those systems, there's nothing inherently wrong with that. It's a very efficient way of running a society. The issue is not the system; the issue is the ethics that cover the dispersal and distribution of the profits."

'How far can a corporation be said to have ethics?' I challenge back. Isn't the role of a corporation set down by its articles of association and the opinions of its shareholders? Smit concedes that there are huge hurdles to jump. "Part of the Eden Trust's mission is to see if we can run the Company (the Eden Operating Company) ethically," he says "but the battle – even between people of goodwill – is very difficult because of third party rules of governance." He expresses surprise (and some dismay) at the powerlessness felt by many captains of industry in the face of their shareholders.

But in Smit's mind, these are critical questions. He is keenly aware of the fragility of even the largest entities. "The Assyrians and Sumerians both brought themselves down by creating salinity (in their ecosystems), the Greeks and Romans cut down all their trees and lost the fertility of their soil." It's the same with companies. "A company is at its most vulnerable when it is at the peak of its success. Because they don't take innovation on board – they're too arrogant."

And we do need to innovate. We discuss a long list of environmental pressures, but Smit sees something else too – a deeper change in society. He calls it 'Surfeit Disease', that feeling of "I've got two cars, I've got this, I've got that, why don't I feel any better?" "There is a spiritual yearning (with a small 's')", he concludes, "to do with feeling that there's more to life than just having things". Unless the big corporations understand what motivates people, even the biggest could – in his opinion – disappear within ten years.

In Eden, Smit hopes to create a model of an alternative, but still highly profitable business. These are radical concepts – the site aims to be 'waste neutral' by buying volumes of recycled products equal to the waste it produces, and there are 1,200 local suppliers boosting the Cornish economy to the tune of £160m per year, even when they cost more than their competitors 'up-country'.

"Commerce is so sexy" says Smit. "Each individual in a big corporation is making decisions every day that have wide effects. In one move, I reckon you could shift the world massively". Perhaps because of the commercial success of Eden, the standard defences don't cut much ice with Smit. "Everyone responds by saying, 'The expense will cripple us', but that just means 'I'm scared of change'". It sounds like a leap of faith, but with the right frameworks and good communication, Smit knows there is a better way. Eden is inspiring, and I wonder aloud to what extent we could apply the same ideas to mega-corporations. "But you can! You can!" Smit enthuses, and the look in his eyes tells me that he believes it.

IEMA for Sustainable Development Student Essay Award

Students in full time or part time education are invited to enter an essay for the IEMA student essay award competition.

Essays can be on any topic related to sustainable development and should not be longer than 2,000 words.

The competition is an opportunity for students to demonstrate an understanding of the subject and their ability to write in an engaging and original manner.

The winning entry will receive an award and certificate at the IEMA's Annual Conference in 2004.

To obtain a copy of the competition rules please contact Paula Gouldthorpe at p.gouldthorpe@iema.net or call Paula on tel: 0152 254 0069.

The closing date for entries is 29 February 2004

Professor Steven Hill
Chair of the Judges Panel

Colin Bush's wining essay in the 2003 competition was published in issue 17, June 2003, of 'the environmentalist'. This issue can be purchased from the IEMA by going to www.iema.net/shop.