

Designers are in a conceptual limbo in the struggle with sustainability, there seems to be a binary of designers who are ready to assume all responsibility, and designers who are keen to shift the blame. The aim here is to examine what is expected of us as designers within the realm of sustainability, and whether or not such expectations are fair.

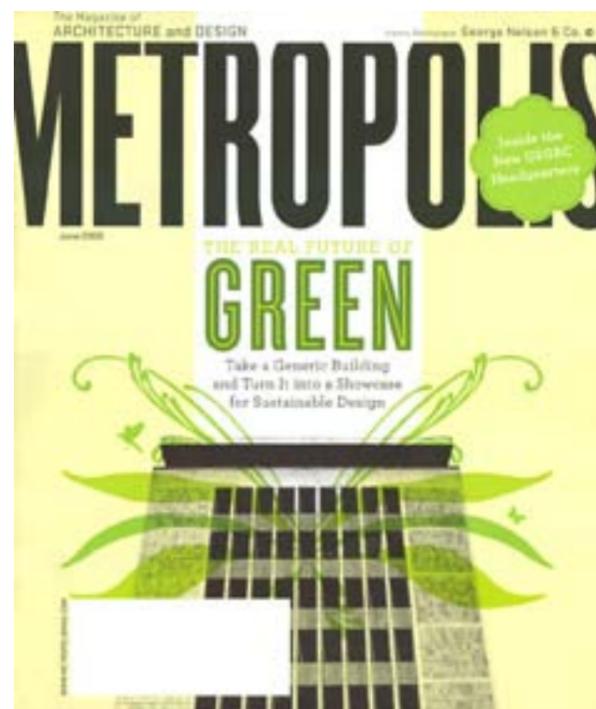
AIGA's Standards of Professional Practice is a great moral compass for recent design times. The standards were devised back in 1994, which doesn't seem too long ago, but when put into context with the rapidly changing industry, it is a testament to their credibility that they have escaped amendment for sixteen years. Though, of course, an amendment was eventually inevitable.

Nothing was taken away in the 2010 re-statement, but two points were added:

7.2 A professional designer is encouraged to contribute five percent of his or her time to projects in the public good—projects that serve society and improve the human experience.

7.3 A professional designer shall consider environmental, economic, social and cultural implications of his or her work and minimize the adverse impacts.¹

Both points hint at how a designer can help perpetuate the ethos of sustainability in their work, by either donating their time to a 'green' project (which safely falls under the umbrella of 'public good') and by always considering the 'adverse impacts' of their work. As designers we can patrol our patch of the design process, consider our place in the cycle; what has come before the brief reaches us, and what will be the impact of what we design once it leaves our hands, and solve the problems and make judgements accordingly. In essence, designers must sweep their own doorstep. It seems somewhat idealistic to assume that the entire world would be sustainable in exchange for five percent of a designer's time, and a little introspection on just who or what their designs are affecting. It surely solves part of the problem, but the problem at whole still remains.



Szenasy's *Metropolis* (Image from GADarchitecture.com)

Susan Szenasy gave a talk to AIGA² on the role that graphic designers play within the realm of sustainability, the core of which distils to the fact that as designers we should question practices that we are involved in. We should not be sated by recycled paper (or sustainable forestry); but instead call into question the entire systems of paper and print themselves, and their environmental impact through the usage of bleaches and other harmful chemicals.

She essentially states that designers should not be passive in their sustainability, and should be actively seeking out ways to change. It seems to suggest that sustainability is solely a designer's responsibility, and that when faced with those facets of sustainability that we cannot practise alone, we should form almost vigilante groups of educators, chemists, or architects so that we are better equipped to accomplish more.



5 Broadgate, London. (Image from original Observer article by Rowan Moore, which Poynor quotes.)

Rick Poynor shares his thoughts in *How to Chew Gum while Walking* an Observer's Room piece for Design Observer, and his views appear radically different to what Szenasy was arguing for. He urges designers to be more principled, which is something that can be gleaned from both the AIGA's standards for professional practice, and Szenasy's talk, yet he takes it much further - He states we should never try to 'bend clients'³ to our view-point, and if there is any disagreement between designer and client over principles, then we must simply 'change the situation,'³ by finding a new client/designer. Poynor's viewpoint here is in drastic contrast to Szenasy's - where he states we should never 'bend'³ clients, whereas Szenasy takes the approach that we should bend them to the point of breaking, and where Poynor takes the almost turn-coat stance of walking away from someone with differing methodologies, Szenasy suggests we should engage with these methodologies and change them, so that others may benefit.

In practise, both viewpoints seem impractical; Poynor encourages us to turn down work to follow in the footsteps of 'more principled'³ designers even in this economic climate, but he is ignoring a large group of designers; mainly students and junior designers, who are simply not in a position to turn away work, and Szenasy's approach of incessant demand for change would surely lose more client's than it gains. The adage goes that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar; but here neither option seems sweet enough to work on a day-to-day level.

Though both arguments are not without their flaws, (Szenasy seems to paint designers as superheroes, in a position of incredible importance and responsibility; and though she's clearly impassioned and educated about sustainability, there is a fine line between impassioned and aggressive,) both points share certain core sentiments that are echoed throughout literature on sustainability and design. These core sentiments are that a designer must assume some responsibility for the sustainability issue; that the problems of sustainability are much too vast to be solved by graphic designers alone; and that the issue of sustainability is not going anywhere without a radical thought-process upheaval – The systems need to be changed.



A Safe Place - Image by Rob Kollaard. (Taken from Burgoyne's Creative Review blog)

In a recent post on the Creative Review blog in reference to design efforts to help the victims of the recent Earthquake in Japan, **Patrick Burgoyne** wrote that graphic designer's collective unease at the event 'Stems from feelings of inadequacy in comparison to other areas of design.'⁴

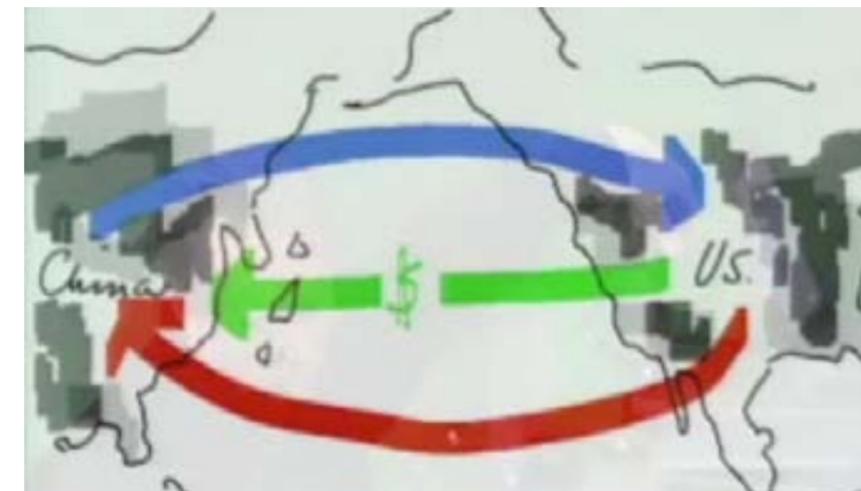
He was referring to how graphic communicators match up in regards to the fields of product design and architecture, who in times of crisis can offer real, tangible help that can be put in to practise within context. As with sustainability, (a form of responsibility; after all,) as graphic designers, we're not in the optimum position to offer pragmatic solutions, as we are limited as to what we can produce as an outcome, we can only offer two dimensional solutions to what is essentially a three dimensional problem. The scope of environmental problems is too broad to rest on the shoulders of just one discipline, and it is up to us to engage with other disciplines in order to help solve them.



Still from McDonough's TED Talk. (Screen-capped from a hard-copy.)

William McDonough is one of the authors of the Cradle-to-Cradle design manifesto and one of the leaders of the movement, in which there is 'no endgame,'⁵ all aspects of design should be infinitely cyclical, and it shares and almost Gaian world-view. In McDonough's 2005 TED Talk, he talks of his involvement with the Chinese government, and how the Chinese are breaking a cycle of 'mutual destruction'⁵ with the U.S that has long consisted of a constant back-and-forth of ill considered practises and harmful disposal methods. In doing so, he will hopefully take the cold-war mentality that the U.S Possess and turn it into a positive; instead of a stalemate over nuclear arms the situation could turn into each country constantly bettering one another, and as a by-product of the U.S's petulance in coveting what their neighbours have, could end up bettering the world at large. He highlights the core root of the word 'competition' from the Latin 'Com Petare'⁵ which literally translated means, strive together.

It is an adaptable view that bridges the gap between all aspects of design, that we should all be striving together for better ecological practises, and if friendly competition will allow these new practises to thrive then it should be encouraged; as he states with professional athletes 'they get fit together, and then they compete.'⁵



Still showing the 'mutual destruction' from McDonough's TED Talk. (Screen-capped from a hard-copy.)



Pepsi's non-plastic bottle. (Taken from Greenerpackage.com)

To see this in modern design practise, it is not too far-fetched to say that Pepsi's recent bottle re-design — a biodegradable completely plastic-free bottle made from naturally occurring starches— is in some part another stunt in their constant game of one-upmanship with Coca Cola. If that isn't so, and Pepsi's agenda is far more altruistic, then all the same we will look to Coca Cola expectantly, to see what they will do next, and of course they will want to do what Pepsi have done, only bigger and better. It may make Coca Cola's Cees van Dongen, (a member of their Environment, Health & Safety council) back-track on this quote from 2009, *'For the next 5-10 years we don't see biodegradable plastics as an option for our bottles.'*⁶

The main issue graphic designers can take at McDonough's talk is his *'Design Like a Tree'*⁵ maxim, is simply an issue of scale. A self-sufficient city isn't hard to imagine, a self sufficient house even less so, but how are we to create a self-sufficient poster, or document? Perhaps what we take away from McDonough's practise is not the mechanical bones of it, but the less tangible processes; the notion that friendly competition can cause radical benevolent change; and it wouldn't hurt if designers considered what they create in cyclical terms, stopping to think about the afterlife of a design, as well as just the shelf-life.

Stuart Walker highlights the need for a change in the system in his book *Sustainable By Design*. He states *'designers can make significant contributions to this endeavour by developing solutions that challenge precedents and demonstrate alternative possibilities – but to do this we will need to transform design education and design practice'*⁷ and thus implies that without a radical overhaul in so many aspects of sustainability, at best designers on a personal scale would just be holding their fingers in a dam.

Kate Fletcher and **Phillip T Goggin's** critique on the *Dominant Stances of Ecodesign* briefly states that the challenge of viewing how consumers impact the environment, and how to improve this impact *'transcends the formalized boundaries of the natural and social sciences to include a necessary role for those who make decisions about the technology we use.'*⁸ It seems to suggest a universal governing body, enforceable guidelines for industry, or in-house elected *'Descision makers'* that would definitely include designers – Mandatory sustainability may be the only key to global success, an impossible task for Szenasy's *'Citizen Designer.'*²

Graphic Designers are problem-solvers, whether that problem be how we get a product into the right hands, or how to process masses of information into something legible, then maybe it is our responsibility to the world at-large to redesign the systems. To redesign the way we think. The solution here seems at a glance to go against everything we know; instead of solving the problem, we create one; we make the problem of damaging practises and viewpoints so large that people can no longer ignore it; we're persuaders, and if we can't solve the problem ourselves, (not solely through keeping up the home front of sweeping our doorsteps) then we can use our skills and time to ensure that we inspire the people who can.

Bibliography / End notes

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Pepsi's non-plastic bottle, from Greener Package.com

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