

## **What is Sustainable Graphic Design?**

Some kind of intro needed!?!?!?!?

What ties all my work together?

I've been looking at a lot of different things the last several weeks.

I've been working since 2006 in and around sustainability.

Sustainability takes over where environmentalism ends, moving from the realm of the environment into all realms. We must allow our designs, strategies and methodologies to evolve and adapt to new ideas, new hybrids — accept and deal with a constant flux between nature, society, economy — everything.

In my twenty year role as graphic designer I've designed books, record sleeves, magazines, logos, websites, exhibition graphics, and built digital tools. Regardless of final forms, or if its client-based or self-initiated, I treat all design projects as opportunities for intellectual inquiry and self-expression.

I'm going to walk us through a few case-studies dealing with "what Sustainable Aesthetics might look like." ...

## **A Place to Start**

In the 2013 book *Flourishing: A Frank Conversation about Sustainability*, John Ehrenfeld writes "The key to doing something about sustainability is that you first have to say what it is that you want to sustain."<sup>1</sup> So, to define sustainable graphic design we must first define what it is we are sustaining.

As a quick aside, here are some definitions of sustainability... Most of them speak vaguely about looking out for the future, or conserving resources, or just being nice into the future, but they aren't clear about what is to be sustained, other than I guess whatever we think our current situations are.

If sustainable graphic design is design in service of what we want to sustain – what's worth sustaining? (this means that if we want to sustain the status quo, then that is what sustainable graphic design is – hmmm!?). Ehrenfeld wants to sustain “that all humans and other life should flourish.”<sup>2</sup>

Designer Bruce Mau actually has a similar description for the goals of *Massive Change*: “Our project is the welfare of *all life* as a practical objective.”<sup>3</sup>

In this line of reasoning sustainable graphic design is “graphic design in support of all life flourishing,” or “graphic design for the welfare of all life.” Sustainable graphic design doesn't then solely rely on better materials or more socially conscious manufacturing. Graphic design framed this way may preclude certain types of projects and certain kinds of clients. Graphic design framed this way will have to evolve over time – what is important today to help all life will presumably change by next year or in a decade. Graphic design framed this way opens up the realm of possibilities for what a graphic design project is. Sustainable Graphic Design defined this way is *different* than status quo design. All life flourishing is not the traditional goal of business, culture, and design.

Throughout art and design history, new thinking and new tools launched new aesthetic outcomes. Sustainable graphic design, graphic design for the welfare of all life, requires different ways of thinking than other current designs. Sustainability brings with it all kinds of new technologies, new social structures, and new tools; so Sustainable graphic design should then carry with it the potential for different and new styles/aesthetics.

## What does our “different” kind of design look like?

What do you visually picture in your mind when you hear “sustainable graphic design?” Is there a particular aesthetic A particular color? A particular archetypal client? A particular feeling? A particular message? A particular set of symbols?

What aesthetic is most sustainable? How do we answer this question? Is it even worth asking? And then what do we base our choices on: energy reduction? Better resource use? Instigating social change? (Minimalism is the most sustainable aesthetic!?)

### Aside 1

Reduction as a design strategy. Taking one starting point and attempting to reduce colors, forms, coverage, etc.

Include Make/UnMake graphics?

Is selecting a font that uses minimal ink the best way to select a font? Should a font's or grid's appearance matter as much as the energy and material and social ills it saves? Would a font that is more condensed and thus uses up less space (saving tons of paper over a print run and exposure to chemicals to the printers (I guess we should be spec'ing an inert ink as well (can we make our own inks from oak galls and iron ore?))) be better? Can we combine the two? The thinnest, most condensed, lightest ink coverage font is the most sustainable? This can easily be taken absurd lengths.

### Aside 2

Sustainability. Experimental letterforms made using 000letter <http://kielm.land/>. playing around w/ idea of minimal line width and general scale for saving both space and ink coverage.

Instead of just reducing or minimizing resources, could we reuse or recycle? Is there a way to graphic design that uses old materials over and over again? Can we apply the Cradle to Cradle cyclical idea of

\_waste = food\_ to our graphic designing? Via the "waste = food" concept, Michael Braungart and William McDonough want us to understand our culture's problematic relationship with waste. Nature produces no waste; outputs from one system are always inputs for another. However, our current design and consumer cultures do not operate in this way. Karrie Jacobs points this out quite bluntly in her essay *Disposability, Graphic Design, Style, and Waste*: designers make garbage. Our inputs have only one output, trash! And trash must be sent away; not locally used for making more design... How can our creative waste from a design process become food for other designs/design processes??

This line of design problem solving is limited in its ability to exact meaningful change. It tackles resultant outcomes from a resource perspective; but doesn't embrace "that all life should flourish." Negative effects can be minimized, but is focusing on resource efficiencies enough? Making choices around resource use might make "less bad" graphic design, but it doesn't necessarily make for *sustainable* graphic design.

### **Example: Green Acres**

*Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses, and Abandoned Lots* was a book and an exhibition that I worked on with the Curator Sue Spaid for the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, OH. The exhibition featured artists using farming as their main form of practice and expression.

I had a goal to make the resultant book "sustainable" — these were mainly sustainability focused artists, how could I better represent ecological inventiveness in the printed design? However, in the end the only thing that made the production of this book "sustainable" was that it was printed on demand, and printed using recycled, unbleached paper. My thinking was limited to this "try to minimize material or process damage" scope at the time.

Visually, the book was meant to critique commercial farming — juxtaposing artistic field graphics over a constrained grid based on aerial commercial farmland photography. But while the book intends to say something different, it generally conforms to common standards of "good" modernist layout. Other than a minor production method improvement, it's the same ... !

There was a glimmer of something else though: Reuse of a format! (or maybe "constraint" or "systems" from *The Sustainability Principles* ???). Sue had worked on an exhibition 10 years earlier called *Ecovention*. That book was an 8x8 square. So we made *Green Acres* an 8x8 square to match as a collection.

Do these choices make it "Sustainable Graphic Design?"

### **Ideological, Critical, Beautiful**

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby write in their 2001 book *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Objects* that "all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view."<sup>5</sup> If our world view is "the welfare of all life," how does that shift what and how we graphic design?

#### **Aside 3**

Sustainability design should be critical of the status quo. How does something visual do this? Include a design-a-day that fits this?

Dunne and Raby are proponents of "critical design," or design that "provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical, or economic values."<sup>6</sup> So, sustainable graphic design is not just design that helps people and our planet, but design that should also be critical of existing social, cultural, technical, AND economic structures; since many of these things are harming all life, not helping them to flourish.

We judge graphic design on whether or not it is formally "good." However, we use criteria for formal goodness that are part of the systems we need to be critical of. The characteristics we base formal goodness on come from modernist ideals born out of the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries. What started as a melange of avant grade art movements is now something adopted by business, government, and general society as "good" style. Mid-century modernism is so embedded in culture that the "rules" of good graphic designing are just the visual "rules" of modernism.‡7 Our sense of good or beautiful design is biased towards modernist ideals co-opted by the capitalist status quo. Are these valid criteria for sustainable graphic design's formal correctness to be judged with? What new criteria are there for beauty in Sustainable Graphic Design?

#### **Aside 4**

The Bauhaus. One place to find graphic design "goodness." This is one formal outcome from a set of ideals. But, does this offer us anything once taken to the realm of the sustainable? does this say anything about the welfare of all life?

A bauhaus graphic of some kind?

#### **Example: MICA Grad Zine**

While this doesn't completely abandon modernist design principles, this mailer for the MICA Graduate Admissions does use imagery, layouts, and a format more closely related to Zine culture. The printing structure was designed to minimize printing waste -- the front and back of this "poster" are printed all as one plate, so the press sheet goes through the press once, then is flipped over, and goes through the press again, voila. This means front and back of the pages were able to all be printed with one plate per color instead of two or more...

#### **Example: Ecovention Europe**

I could also talk about how this book uses colors and space differently than Green Acres, and since it directly reuses the original grids and such can be "critical" even if it doesn't adopt new criteria

of review!?

### **How do we define beauty?**

In *The Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton writes: "To call a work of architecture or design beautiful is to recognize it as a rendition of values critical to our flourishing. A transubstantiation of our individual ideals in a material medium."<sup>8</sup> So, however our ideals can be materialized into graphic design will yield "beautiful" graphic design.

All styles being equal, sustainable designers must see the non-sustainable as the less than beautiful. Edwin Datschefski calls this "the hidden ugliness of traditional products."<sup>9</sup> Basically, if your design doesn't account for the welfare of all life, regardless of whatever external aesthetics wrap it, your design is ugly.

A design is both sustainable AND beautiful when its form declares that humans and all other life should flourish. Is there a style, aesthetic, or form says this the most clearly?

#### **Aside 5**

The non-sustainable = the ugly the sustainable = the beautiful.

### **Other Ways To Define "Beauty"?**

Bruce Sterling in his final essay for the Viridian Design community outlines four criteria for sorting through our lives' objects:

- Beautiful Things
- Sentimental Things
- Utilitarian Things
- Everything else.

If an object in your possession fits into the first three categories (beautiful, sentimental, or utilitarian), then keep it. If it falls into "Everything Else" be rid of it. When Alain de Botton spoke of architectural beauty, his "beauty" encompassed all Sterling's "keep" categories.

To me, a hammer is utilitarian AND beautiful. To you, it might just be functional. The paintings, drawings, and houseplants I find beautiful are what another might find ugly. The things I find sentimental are probably unique to me.

Perhaps our thinking on sustainable graphic design's "look" must take it's cue from this: Anything that helps promote the flourishing of nature's interconnected systems will look correct. That doesn't require a particular style, material, or typeface — it requires the right ideals; the right messages. If a viewer is turned on by the pure beauty of a solution, or its utilitarian functionality matters not, what matters is what is communicated.

**Example: ICFP Booklet Generator**

Here's a utilitarian design solution that could be considered sustainable. The real "design" here is that a web app can output all this conferences materials as a printable PDF, bypassing tons of time in InDesign typesetting it all manually. This is a fairly simple thing, but is project for a client helping with important social sustainability issues... It's not drop dead beautiful, and its certainly not sentimental, but it solves a problem in a clear, repurpose-able way and saved a lot of hours.

**Example: Design for farms? CF2T? FiveSeeds? Whom else?**

**Example: Form <> Content <> Context / Economy <> Society <>**

**Nature!?**

Do I need to explain some graphics really clearly???



## **Sustainable aesthetics visualize good ethics**

How might we go about realizing in form how we have aligned ourselves philosophically?

"There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named. It is never twice the same, because it always takes its shape from the particular place in which it occurs."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the issue here is that the qualities that do promote the welfare of all life are, like the quality without a name Alexander presents, ineffable. And like the quality without a name, the aesthetics that correspond with this, the graphic design visuals that might show the welfare of all life shift and change with different contexts. A wild garden, a cathedral, a monarch butterfly, a thriving farmers market. So instead of attempting to nail things down literally or concretely, a "feeling" needs to be found instead?

(Page 6 of notes have a lot of things to think about on this one in particular space wise..... )

### **Aside 6**

Does this feel sustainable? Are these indicative of sustainability other than just as signs we've prescribed this meaning to?  
image: Graphic of windmills and trees and such Does the way that this look signal sustainability? image: Buckminster Fuller's world fair geodesic dome!

## **Semiotics: What aesthetics or forms convey a feeling of sustainability?**

Forms are chosen to convey certain meanings. Typefaces impart different feelings and intents. No aesthetic direction is without expression. Viewers refer to visual solutions as feeling cold, sterile,

corporate, warm, homey, etc. Is there then a visual solution that can convey the feeling of “sustainability?” that can convey the feeling of all life flourishing?

A search for sustainable aesthetics online uncovers leaves, green things, brown things, wood things, bamboo things... These aesthetic tropes come back again and again, but this does not necessarily convey the feeling of sustainability, certainly just turning something green does not correspond with the welfare of all life.

Design communication happens in a single direction — from the designed piece to the viewer. In this way, it isn't really communication, it is signaling. Signaling what is supposed to be happening. (A tea kettle whistles to let you know it is ready; the user has no communication back with the tea kettle). When we say that design communicates what we really tend to mean is that design signals clearly and cleverly. We mean it in a one directional, semiotic sense.

How does a sustainable object signal? What does a sustainable object signal? What signals are the best signals for the welfare of all life?

**Example: My sustainability icons?**

**Example: The Greenest Green?**

### **Signs Signaling Sustainability**

I like to call designs like this "Signs signaling Sustainability." This is the real opportunity for Designers taking climate action — turning every design opportunity into a sign signaling sustainability. Make tangible, make understandable something about climate change. This is doable no matter the project; no matter the prompt. There are myriad other aspects of climate change and sustainability one might signal.

### **Reverberation Crosswalks**

Take for instance Graham Coreil Allen's *Reverberation Crosswalks*. On the surface, these are fun, brightly colored crosswalks — paint on cement and asphalt; not particularly innovative in the "new materials" or "direct carbon capture." But! looking at Project DrawDown solutions, *walkable cities* is the 50th overall reduction solution. Suddenly *Reverberations Crosswalks* signals a sustainable vector forward. The neighborhood around this school is more walkable. You can't not notice the crosswalks, hopefully this makes you more likely to walk yourself. This concept is cheap; fast; easily replicated; can be customized for region, culture, available materials, etc.; AND can help make more people walk in the city. Bam! Climate Designed.

### **Solar .lowtechmagazine.com**

Distributed Solar Photovoltaics is also on Drawdown's list. And Low Tech Magazine's solar powered website signals how we might visualize energy usage; how we might enable new systems of powering our tools; questions if we really need constant connection; and how aesthetic choices correlate to physical resources even in the digital sphere.

### **DC High Water Mark Project**

And you don't have to just signal "sustainable" things from DrawDown... that's just an easy way to get started.

The DC water mark project visualizes increased flooding and water level rise — where these impacts will be felt by you in this place! The water level rings articulates to us "oh shit, this place might be underwater pretty frequently given our current projected future!" Then maybe we can act accordingly and redirect our present towards a future where that is no longer true. Without *seeing* your house or office or favorite park area submerged, even symbolically, you cannot envision an alternative.

### **Tattfoo Tan, S.O.S. Steward**

Enrolled in various green courses and acquired certification for green knowledge. To flaunt my new found title in the form of a merit patch on my gray coverall and wear it during events and gardening session. I'm intrigue by the certification of knowledge and the power that was bestow by the agency that gave the certificate. Partly propelled by the thirst of knowledge and partly to sustain the endurance of going to classes and community service requirements of these courses. (<http://tattfoo.com/sos/SOSGreenStewardship.html>)

### **Amager Bakke Vapor Ring Rendering**

Copenhagen waste to energy plant is so clean it puffs just c02 and water vapor... Captures 1 ton of C02, then exhausts it as a smoke ring. Help you visualize this otherwise intangible!?

### **Climate Design Posters?**

Printing thing after thing on the scrap paper left over in the RISO studio...

### **Others???**

- *Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary*
- Neil Donnelly, 2016. The interior paper gets gradually thinner from the beginning to the end, conveying scarcity and depletion through the materiality of the book. One could easily see something like this in reverse, perhaps a book about sea level rise has its paper get thicker as the book progresses? (<https://neildonnelly.net/#climates>)
- Space Hippie?
- Improvisational Lamps?
- Flower based "down" substitute?
- Amager Bakke unmade vapor ring?
- Print posters on found paper?
- Bike Pool Noodle Hack <https://www.are.na/block/4299163>

### **Conclusions?**

The definition of sustainable graphic design is both an easy one and hard one. It is easy in that sustainable graphic design is just design that sustains the welfare of all life. That is a short, direct sentence. Easy to write down. But, it is hard because, well, what constitutes graphic design that sustains the welfare of all life? What is the *je ne sais quoi* that makes sustainable design different, more correct, more capable of doing this sustaining?

Our current tools, ideas, and cultural systems aren't setup to help us to understand this or to manufacture products in this vein. Part of figuring out what sustainable graphic design is, means we'll also have to continue to decide what forms, tools, and new societal structures are required to realize it effectively (& help to design these too). Designers as sustainabilitists = designers as good human beings. :boom:

So what is Sustainable Graphic Design? Anything that visualizes the caretaking of our Spaceship Earth ...

[[ This ending sucks. Still need something a bit more clear and really "concluding" here... ]]

What does SGD look like?

I am currently inclined to believe that there is no single way that sustainable graphic design looks, nor a single "correct" way that it is made (what materials it might be, or what processes it includes can be easily sorted into good, bad, ugly, less bad, etc. — but one golden solution does not exist).

A "correct" style may be irrelevant when it comes to what sustainable graphic design should look like.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "sustainable design?" Brown paper? Soy Ink? Bamboo? Reuse? Is there a particular aesthetic? Is there a particular kind of client? Is there a particular

product? Is there a particular visual trope or look or feel? How about a particular message? A particular manufacturing process?

so what does sustainable graphic design look like? I'm still not completely sure, but I'm still working on it...

**Example: End with the sustainabilist principles???**

*The Sustainabilist Principles* is a modular manifesto; a collection of my ideals for designing as a Sustainabilist; the ways of thinking to create sustainably as considered in 2009. The goal was to create an object whose form directly embodied the principles it conveyed, while also disseminating them. It was a poster, that happened to also be a sculpture, and a novel concept.

Sustainable Design does not exist.

"Sustainable design does not exist" was first a pessimistic "fourth way." Is design all just trash? does design create waste period, so nothing is sustainable? Or, literally, sustainable design is not a thing: anything you are making is unmaking so much else.

But! "Sustainable design does not exist" came to signify an alternative vector; it didn't exist because it was ephemeral! because it reused existing objects in a new way! that it left no trace! suddenly this felt like a prompt for new works; new questions! A useful constraint going forward.

*The Sustainabilist Principles* was the real example I've made of a design "not existing."

*The Sustainabilist Principles* started out as me looking at the books on my desk, wondering where "sustainable" design lies within them... my trying to map connections between all these texts... my trying to write about and illustrate these principles I was garnering; the interconnections over time and space of similar ideals...

The final, resulting piece *was* the actual books from my actual bookshelf. I hadn't needed to make a book to explain these principles; it was doable with the objects themselves! Bring the right parts together in the gallery, and then *poof* everything goes back to its raw materials when the exhibition was over. Design that does not exist (beyond its necessity).

The books were my books. The screen printed definitions, they were printed on title pages and front matter of found paperback novels. The novels went back to the free book exchange where they were found afterward. Even the shape of the "graphic" was meant to use the embroidery floss interconnecting things in the longest possible pieces to maximize reuse of the thread afterward.

#### Notes

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16. <https://www.contemporaryartscenter.org/exhibitions/2012/09/green-acres>