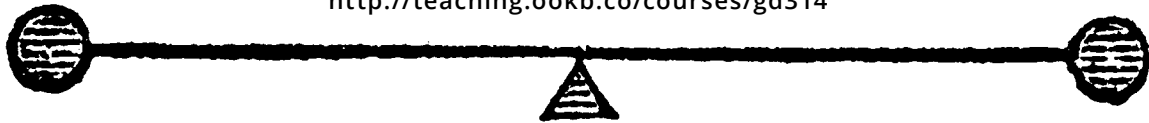


SUSTAINABLE GRAPHIC DESIGN

or, the Designer as Sustainabilist

<http://teaching.ookb.co/courses/gd314>



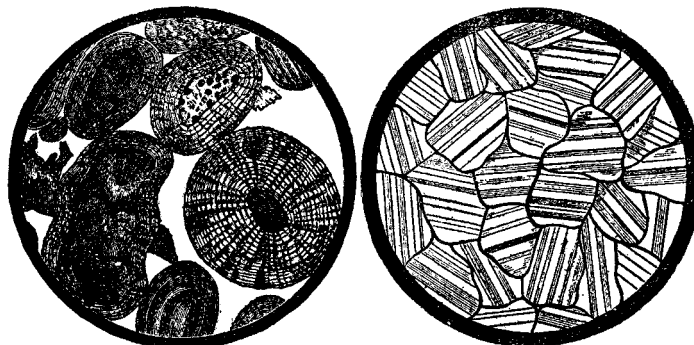
GD 314.01
Mondays
4:00pm–10:00pm
3 Credits
BR306

Kristian Bjørnard
kbjornard@mica.edu
Office: BR317
Office Hours:
Mondays / 12:00pm–3:00pm
Tuesdays / 12:00pm–3:00pm
(& by appointment)

*I will do my best to always
respond to your emails within
24 hours.*

CATALOG DESCRIPTION

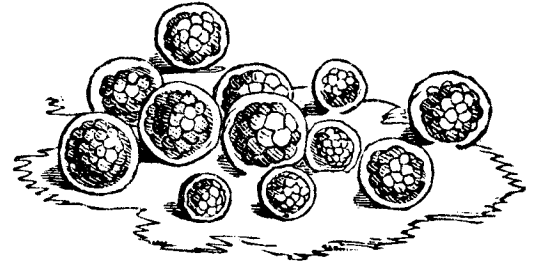
3 credits. This course introduces various facets of sustainability and demonstrates how its principles and philosophies can be applied within the design field. Students become familiar with trends, theories and ideologies, along with practical design needs, and learn to distinguish fact from fallacy. While exploring materials and practices and their environmental and economic consequences, students develop problem-solving alternatives. In addition to new projects, students are asked to rework a previously completed assignment in a sustainable way. Prerequisite: GD 220 & GD 221, or Post-Bac in GD student standing.



LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

1. Generate a personal vision for what “sustainability” means in your graphic design practice;
2. Define patterns and design vernacular as away towards creating your own “sustainable” design
3. aesthetic;
4. Employ concrete sustainable methodologies in the design work;
5. Produce a body of design exploring sustainability as subject, content, and constraint;
6. Distinguish between sustainable truths and fallacies.
7. Formulate practical and fantastical sustainable solutions to design problems.

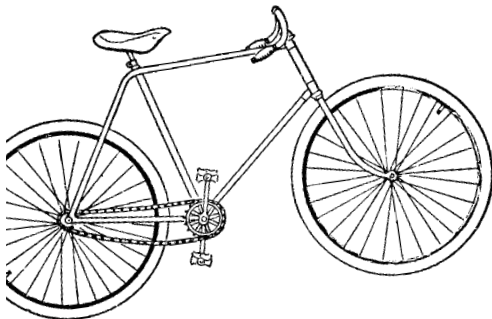


COURSE STRUCTURE & OBJECTIVES

I'll be presenting my ideas, philosophies, and working methods to you over the course of the term (along with the work of other designers and thinkers). You'll be made to work in some of the ways I've found useful in regards to how I think about “sustainability” in my life and design practice. While I ask that you honestly and non-judgementally try these out, once each project or exercise is over you are free to abandon whatever methods we have covered. My main desire for you is not to merely replicate my ideas and practices, but come up with your own methodologies and systems that make sense based on your thoughts or beliefs. Everything I will present is in the service of you coming up with your own philosophy of sustainable design and your own methodologies for your own sustainable design practice.

REQUIREMENTS

- Regular Attendance.
- Successful completion of all projects on the due date(s).
- Class participation.
- You should be doing at least 3 additional hours of work outside of class each week ...



TECHNOLOGY STATEMENT

This course will use industry standard technology, mainly the Adobe Creative Suite: Acrobat, Illustrator, Photoshop and InDesign. Other technology used for presentation and prototyping may also be required but will be dictated by the design of each project.

IN-CLASS TECHNOLOGY USE

During class hours, please don't chat online, send/check messages on phones/computers, check emails, communicate or browse content on social media networks, nor browse the web for content that does not relate directly to class. Please stow cell phones out of sight! Failure to comply with this rule may result in deductions from your final grade.

COMPLAINTS

Students are encouraged to discuss complaints and concerns regarding a class, project or grade with me first, during my office hours or at a time chosen by our mutual consent. Issues that students do not find to be resolved should then be reported to the Department Chair (Brockett Horne, bhorne@mica.edu).

ATTENDANCE

Attendance and participation is mandatory. Arrive on time to the start of each class and after each break. Students who have the equivalent of more than 3 absences are no longer eligible to earn credit for the course.

Irregular attendance or habitual tardiness will lead to lower grades and, ultimately, to probation or dismissal. In the case of extended illness or other legitimate absences that may keep the students from attending a class for more than three meetings, students must contact the *Student Development Specialist* in the *Division of Student Affairs* so that instructors can be notified.

If you miss a class, check the course website (moodle or preferably teaching.ookb.co). Info will be posted each week on what we discussed and instructions, files, and readings that might be needed. If you have additional questions please contact me immediately; don't wait until the next week. You will still be expected to present or be prepared for the following class after any absence.

It is also important you show up to class on time and prepared. We've got a lot to cover and it sets the whole class behind when any of you shows up late. However, being late — even 2 hours late — is favorable to not coming at all.

PARTICIPATION

You are expected to take an active part in this class. Come prepared to discuss readings and the strengths and weaknesses of your classmates work (as well as your own). You are expected to offer, as well as accept, constructive criticism. The ability to effectively articulate and explain your ideas and design decisions is a critical skill that you must develop. Treat your classmates professionally at all times. We will have some sort of critique almost every class period and when we are not lecturing/critiquing/doing demos you will be expected to work on the current project in class. This allows you the benefit of real time feedback from both your peers and your instructor. Take advantage of your class time; the constant interchange of ideas usually leads to better, stronger design solutions.

MATERIALS

- Flickr acct. (post DADs there)
- Books:
 - Flourishing* (bit.ly/flourishingbook)
 - Green Graphic Design* (sl.ookb.co/greengraphicdesign)
- Other materials may come up...

DUE DATES

All projects are due at the START of class on the assigned due date. Projects turned in after that will not be accepted. I repeat: *No late projects will be accepted.* This means you will earn a zero for a late project. If you will be unavailable on a due date make arrangements to turn it in early or by email during that class period. *You are responsible for turning in work on time regardless of attendance.* Do keep in mind that something is better than nothing, so if you aren't finished at least bring what you have so far to critique. In the case of school closing projects will be due at the start of our next regularly scheduled class meeting.

GRADES

Merely completing a project is absolutely not a guarantee of a passing grade! You will eventually be hired based on your portfolio which art directors will review and compare to other designer's they've seen before hiring someone. Your ability to set yourself apart in concept and execution will determine your success in this field both academically and in the real world, so let's start practicing that now. Your grade for the term will be an assessment of how completely you have explored your ideas, researched each project, the success of the design in solving the various assigned problems, uniqueness, CRAFT and presentation.

A+	A	A-	Superior
B+	B	B-	Above Average
C+	C	C-	Average
D+	D	D-	Below Average
F			Failure

Plus or minus may be used. However, for purposes of obtaining a quality point average, each grade category is assigned the following quality points:

$$A = 4 / B = 3 / C = 2 / D = 1 / F = 0$$

(For more information see the Statement of Academic Standards in the Student Handbook.)

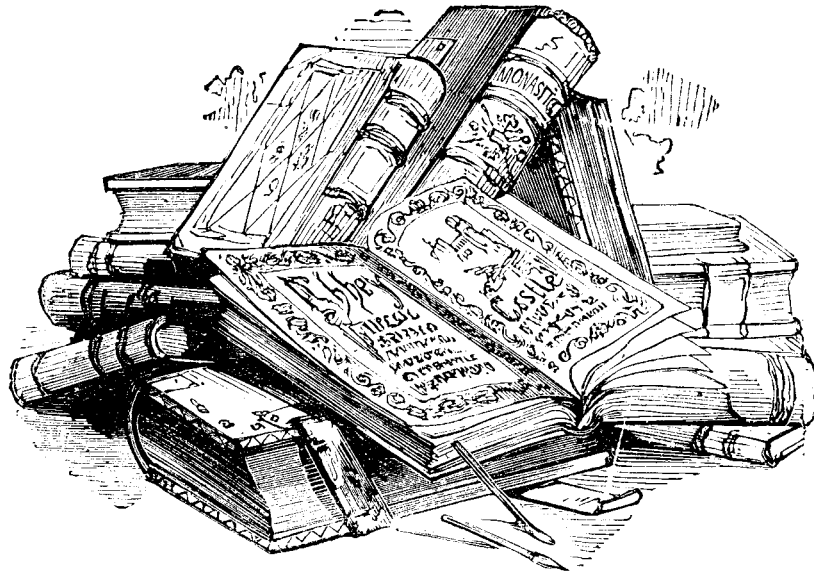
- Class participation is paramount & should show marked progress in the student's ability to talk about design intelligently & constructively.
- Punctuality & participation to in-progress & final critiques will have an impact on the grade for each project.
- Work lost due to technological problems will be considered late. It is important to get in the habit of backing up & duplicating files. Technical trouble is not a valid excuse for missing a deadline — neither academically or professionally.

HINTS FOR SUCCESS

Attend class regularly and on time, meet deadlines, take thorough notes, participate in class discussions and critiques, show a strong sense of concept and design. Do your absolute best on each project and push yourself to do even better on the next project. Strive to be perfect in both concept and craft. Do more than is asked for. Be inventive! Think! Experiment! Bring a positive, enthusiastic, open mind to class. Take advantage of opportunities to be responsible for your own education!

HINTS FOR FAILURE

Don't come to class. Don't complete the projects to the absolute best of your ability. Disrupt class often with snide and personal insults directed at student's work or at them personally. Don't participate in class critiques. Don't ask questions when you have questions and need clarification. Decide you're not responsible for your own education and expect me to somehow pour the information and practice into your brain.



READINGS

1. Hans Haacke's *Ideas For Making* pg. 8 of syllabus
2. Alan Chochinov's *A Manifesto For Sustainability In Design* pg. 9 of syllabus
3. Bruce Sterling's *Last Veridian Note* pg. 11 of syllabus
4. *Flourishing* please get a copy - bit.ly/flourishingbook
5. *Green Graphic Design* please get a copy - sl.ookb.co/greengraphicdesign

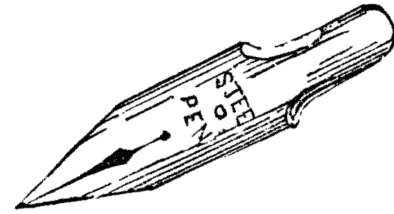
I need you all to purchase *Flourishing* (bit.ly/flourishingbook) and *Green Graphic Design* (sl.ookb.co/greengraphicdesign). The other readings are all in this syllabus booklet. We will have in class discussions each week there is a reading due. The readings should also be helpful in your formulating your own opinions and ideas around sustainability as it pertains to design. They should also influence your daily designs and the direction of your final research, as well as the sustainable design decisions you are making on other projects through the term (and hopefully beyond).

More non-required (but recommended) readings can be found at:
library.thesustainabilist.com

PROJECTS

1. *What is Sust GD.*

Find an example of something that you think is “sustainable graphic design.” Explain your choice.



2. *What Does Sustainable Graphic Design Look Like. (Design-a-Day)*

I ask that you make something everyday from our first class meeting until February 23rd, and then again from March 30th until April 20th. Spend a half-an-hour or so on each day's design. I know this doesn't sound “sustainable” to just generate a ton of work, but I think this assignment is useful a) to experiment with visualizing sustainable messages, and b) to learn about re-using ideas, coming up with recyclable solutions, and various other options for what sustainability can mean as a design tool. This will have some relevance to things we talk about like vernacular design, reuse and recycling in graphic design, and design experimentation as a research and learning tool. Use whatever content you desire (pulling in content from assigned readings, general sustainable thoughts that interest you, or visuals that try to explain some aspect of your opinions on sustainability and graphic design would be good areas to look into). Whatever content you choose the aim is this: make designs that interpret sustainability, examine potential “sustainable aesthetics,” and practice making work that has “reuse” or “recycle” as part of its imperative. This is about patterns and design vernacular (a design language). Patterns are a way of seeing and relating to the world. A design language is a set of patterns that describe a standard way of solving problems.

- Ongoing over term (mainly 1/26–2/23, & 3/30–4/20).
- Minimum of 35 total: 7 weeks, 5 per week (basically the weeks we have assigned readings so you can use them to help with prompts if you need). For you over achievers, you can do more if you want. The most you could foreseeably make would be 105 (7/wk for 15 weeks).
- Please create a flickr account (if you don't already have one), make a Design-a-day set, and upload each piece to that daily as you go. I'll link to everyone's from the class site.

3. *Sustainabilize your Designs*

Once during the term you'll be ask to present work you're creating (for other classes or specifically for this class) which you've decided to make “sustainable.” We'll look at these in class and discuss ideas as a group for what's successful and what's not (aesthetically and sustainably), and how each student's works can be made more sustainable. This might be specing different materials, changing a form, or re-envisioning why the thing is being designed in the first place. This should be fun. These solutions can be fantastical or practical.

- Ongoing over term, students will be given a day to present.
- Documentation of the project(s) due at end of term.

4. *The Designer As Sustainabilist (A Research project)*

We're making a publication as a class. We will spend some time discussing specing a “sustainable” printing project so our printed piece can be responsible. You each will need to research something of your own choosing related to sustainability and design. Research, write, and then design a 1000-2000 word essay on what sustainability means in regards to your graphic design practice. I'll give you page size constraints (everyone will get the same page sizes), and then you can do whatever you want within those constraints that helps to illustrate and iterate your written ideas. As long as you adhere to the page constraints, this is basically a wide open assignment.

- Due @ last week of term. We'll spend the last class getting our publication ready for print.

Project Epilogue

I think these projects will allow you to explore how “sustainability” and “graphic design” fit together without my prescribing forms or solutions to you. The choices are yours to make. Let me know if you have any questions or concerns. You have my permission to fail. No one learns anything just trying safe, easy stuff.

ROUGH SCHEDULE

- 01/19 No Class.
- 01/26 **Intro;**
 Prof. Bjornard's general sustainability introduction.
 Hans Haacke & Allan Chocinov reading.
 "What is Sust. GD" project.
 Assign D-A-D's.
 Get required books...
- 02/02 Look at "WISGD" pieces.
 Vernacular presentation, talk more about D-A-D's
 Read Last Veridian Note
 Sustainabilize a design of your choosing?
- 02/09 Discussion, Lecture, Workday.
 Reading Flourishing P1
- 02/16 Discussion, Lecture, Workday.
 Reading Flourishing P2
 Look at Sustainabilize a design of your choosing in small groups
- 02/23 Discussion, Reading Flourishing P3
 Prep for next week — starting Amy F. workshop/project/exhibition
- 03/02 Amy Franseschini Workshop (3–5pm)
 Amy F. Lecture, 7pm
 Brief discussion afterward, plan for following weeks
- 03/09 Check-in with group project, Lecture.
- 03/16 *SPRING BREAK*
- 03/23 Check-in with group project, Sue Spaid visit – lecture on eco art, help with project exhibition
- 03/30 Display Group project?
 Start final research/writing projects.
 Sustainabilize a design of your choosing?
 Read Green Graphic Design P1
- 04/06 Check-in with research/writing projects, Discussion, Lecture.
 Hopefully Print Rep is coming to discuss spec'ing a Sust. Project. Read Green Graphic Design P2
- 04/13 Check-in with research/writing projects, Discussion, Lecture.
 Read Green Graphic Design P3
- 04/20 Check-in with research/writing projects, Discussion, Lecture.
- 04/27 Check-in with research/writing projects, Discussion, Lecture.
- 05/04 Last Day, compile research/writing projects into final zine/book and send off to the printer.

WISGD,
 Design-A-Days,
 &
 Sustainabilizing
 your designs...

Workshop and re-
 sulting project...

Research and
 Writing. Aim is
 for a publication...
 newspaper format?
 certainly more
 journalistic and re-
 search based than
 last year...

Design-A-Days II

MICA ADMINISTRATIVE REQUIREMENTS

ADA (AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT)

Any student who may need an accommodation based on the potential impact of a disability should contact the Learning Resource Center at 410.225.2416, in Bunting 458, to establish eligibility and coordinate reasonable accommodations.

EHS (ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY)

It is the responsibility of faculty and students to follow health and safety guidelines relevant to their individual activities, processes, and to review MICA's Emergency Action Plan and attend EHS training. It is each faculty member's responsibility to coordinate with the EHS Office to ensure that all risks associated with their class activities are identified and to assure that their respective classroom procedures mirror the EHS and Academic Department guidelines. Each of these policies and procedures must be followed by all students and faculty. Most importantly, faculty are to act in accordance with all safety compliance, state and federal, as employees of this college and are expected to act as examples of how to create art in a way to minimize risk, and reduce harm to themselves and the environment. Faculty must identify and require appropriate personal protective equipment for each art making process, for each student, in all of their classes, when applicable. Students are required to purchase personal protection equipment appropriate for their major. Those students who do not have the proper personal protection equipment will not be permitted to attend class until safe measures and personal protection are in place.

PLAGIARISM

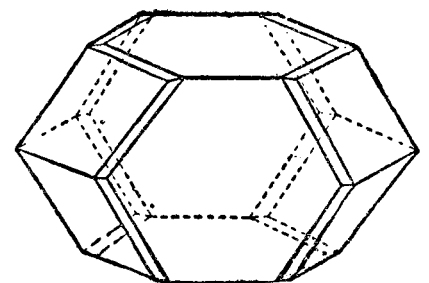
Each discipline within the arts has specific and appropriate means for students to cite or acknowledge sources and the ideas and material of others used in their own work. Students have the responsibility to become familiar with such processes and to carefully follow their use in developing original work.

Policy: MICA will not tolerate plagiarism, which is defined as claiming authorship of, or using

someone else's ideas or work without proper acknowledgment. Without proper attribution, a student may not replicate another's work, paraphrase another's ideas, or appropriate images in a manner that violates the specific rules against plagiarism in the student's department. In addition, students may not submit the same work for credit in more than one course without the explicit approval of the all of the instructors of the courses involved.

Consequences: When an instructor has evidence that a student has plagiarized work submitted for course credit, the instructor will confront the student and impose penalties that may include failing the course. In the case of a serious violation or repeated infractions from the same student, the instructor will report the infractions to the department chair. Depending on the circumstances of the case, the department chair may then report the student to the Office of Academic Affairs, which may choose to impose further penalties, including suspension or expulsion.

Appeal Process: Students who are penalized by an instructor or department for committing plagiarism have the right to appeal the charge and penalties that ensue. Within three weeks of institutional action, the student must submit a letter of appeal to the department chairperson of the course for which actions were taken. The chairperson will assign three members of the relevant department to serve on a review panel. The panel will meet with the student and the instructor of record and will review all relevant and available materials. The panel will determine whether or not to confirm the charge and penalties. The findings of the panel are final. The panel will notify the instructor, the chairperson, the student, and the Office of Academic Affairs of their findings and any recommendations for change in penalties.



Ideas for Making (A Manifesto)

- † make something which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is non-stable...
- ◇ make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted precisely...
- ∞ make something which cannot *perform* without the assistance of its environment...
- ⌘ make something which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and whose function depends on the forces of gravity...
- § make something which the *viewer* handles, with which he plays and thus animates...
- ¬ make something which lives in time and makes the *viewer* experience time...
- ‡ articulate something natural...

— HANS HAACKE, COLOGNE GERMANY, 1965



A Manifesto For Sustainability In Design (By Allan Chochinov)

This was written in 2007

I don't like the word manifesto. It reeks of dogma and rules—two things I instinctually reject. I do love the way it puts things on the line, but I don't like lines, or groups. So a manifesto probably isn't for me. The other thing about manifestos is that they appear (or are written so as to appear) self-evident. This kind of a priori writing is easy, since you simply lay out what seems obviously—even tautologically—true. Of course, this is the danger of manifestos, but also what makes them fun to read. And fun to write. So I'll write this manifesto. I just might not sign it. Anyway, here they are. Exactly 1000 words:

HIPPOCRATIC BEFORE SOCRATIC

“First do no harm” is a good starting point for everyone, but it's an especially good starting point for designers. For a group of people who pride themselves on “problem solving” and improving people's lives, we sure have done our fair share of the converse. We have to remember that industrial design equals mass production, and that every move, every decision, every curve we specify is multiplied—sometimes by the thousands and often by the millions. And that every one of those everys has a price. We think that we're in the artifact business, but we're not; we're in the consequence business.

STOP MAKING CRAP

And that means that we have to stop making crap. It's really as simple as that. We are suffocating, drowning, and poisoning ourselves with the stuff we produce, abrading, out-gassing, and seeping into our air, our water, our land, our food—and basically those are the only things we have to look after before there's no we in that sentence. It gets into our bodies, of course, and it certainly gets into our minds. And designers are feeding and feeding this cycle, helping to turn everyone and everything into either a consumer or a consumable. And when you think about it, this is kind of grotesque. “Consumer” isn't a dirty word exactly, but it probably oughta be.

SYSTEMS BEFORE ARTIFACTS

Before we design anything new, we should examine how we can use what already exists to better ends. We need to think systems before artifacts, services before products, adopting Thackara's* use/not own principles at every step. And when new products are needed, they'll be obvious and appropriate, and then can we conscientiously pump up fossil fuels and start polymerizing them. Product design should be part of a set of tools we have for solving problems and celebrating life. It is a means, not an end.

TEACH SUSTAINABILITY EARLY

Design education is at a crossroads, with many schools understanding the potentials, opportunities, and obligations of design, while others continue to teach students how to churn out pretty pieces of garbage. Institutions that stress sustainability, social responsibility, cultural adaptation, ethnography, and systems thinking are leading the way. But soon they will come to define what industrial design means. (A relief to those constantly trying to define the discipline today!) This doesn't mean no aesthetics. It just means a keener eye on costs and benefits.

SCREWS BETTER THAN GLUES

This is lifted directly from the Owner's Manifesto, which addresses how the people who own things and the people who make them are in a kind of partnership. But it's a partnership that's broken down, since almost all of the products we produce cannot be opened or repaired, are designed as subassemblies to be discarded upon failure or obsolescence, and conceal their workings in a kind of solid-state prison. This results in a population less and less confident in their abilities to use their hands for anything other than pushing buttons and mice, of course. But it also results in people fundamentally not understanding the workings of their built artifacts and environments, and,

*

Mr. Chochinov is referring to John Thackara who writes and thinks a lot about energy, people, and sustainability. He has an amazing book called *In the Bubble: Designing In A Complex World*, and also writes a column for *Design Observer*

more importantly, not understanding the role and impact that those built artifacts and environments have on the world. In the same way that we can't expect people to understand the benefits of a water filter when they can't see the gunk inside it, we can't expect people to sympathize with greener products if they can't appreciate the consequences of any products at all.

DESIGN FOR IMPERMANENCE

In his Masters Thesis, "The Paradox of Weakness: Embracing Vulnerability in Product Design," my student Robert Blinn argues that we are the only species who designs for permanence—for longevity—rather than for an ecosystem in which everything is recycled into everything else. Designers are complicit in this over-engineering of everything we produce (we are terrified of, and often legally risk-averse to, failure), but it is patently obvious that our ways and means are completely antithetical to how planet earth manufactures, tools, and recycles things. We choose inorganic materials precisely because biological organisms cannot consume them, while the natural world uses the same building blocks over and over again. It is indeed Cradle-to-Cradle or cradle-to-grave, I'm afraid.

BALANCE BEFORE TALENTS

The proportion of a solution needs to balance with its problem: we don't need a battery-powered pooper scooper to pick up dog poop, and we don't need a car that gets 17 MPG to, well, we don't need that car, period. We have to start balancing our ability to be clever with our ability to be smart. They're two different things.

METRICS BEFORE MAGIC

Metrics do not get in the way of being creative. Almost everything is quantifiable, and just the exercise of trying to frame up ecological and labor impacts can be surprisingly instructive. So on your next project, if you've determined that it may be impossible to quantify the consequences of a material or process or assembly in a design you're considering, maybe it's not such a good material or process or assembly to begin with. There are more and more people out there in the business of helping you to find these things out, by the way; you just have to call them.

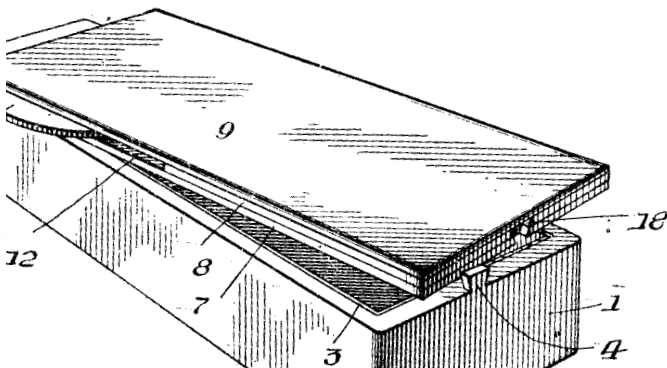
CLIMATES BEFORE PRIMATES

This is the a priori, self-evident truth. If we have any hope of staying here, we need to look after our home. And our anthropocentric worldview is literally killing us. "Design serves people"? Well, I think we've got bigger problems right now.

CONTEXT BEFORE ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING

Understanding that all design happens within a context is the first (and arguably the only) stop to make on your way to becoming a good designer. You can be a bad designer after that, of course, but you don't stand a chance of being a good one if you don't first consider context. It's everything: In graphics, communication, interaction, architecture, product, service, you name it—if it doesn't take context into account, it's crap. And you already promised not to make any more of that.

So there's my manifesto. A little stern perhaps, but that's what editing down to 1000 words will get you. The power of design is an amazing thing. Let's wield it wisely.



The Last Viridian Note (by Bruce Sterling)

*
This was written
in 2008

Recent events have clearly established that the character of the times has changed. The Viridian Design Movement was founded in distant 1999.* After the years transpiring — various disasters, wars, financial collapses and a major change in political tone — the world has become a different place.

It remains only to close the Viridian episode gracefully, and to conclude with a few meditative suggestions.

As I explained in the first Viridian speech, any design movement — social movements of any kind, really — should be designed with an explicit expiration date. The year 2012 would have been the extreme to which Viridian could have persisted. Since the course of history has grown quite jittery, this longer term was spared us.

Some Viridian principles can be lightly rephrased, buffed-up and likely made of practical use in days to come. Others are period notions to be gently tossed into the cultural compost. I could try to describe which are which — but that's a proper job for someone younger.

I'm following current events with keen interest. There's never been a better time for major political and financial interventions in the green space. However, Viridian List is about design interventions, it was not about politics or finance, so a decent reticence is in order at this juncture.

I would like to cordially thank Viridian readers and contributors and advisors for their patience and their generous help over nine years. I hope you feel you derived some benefit from it. I did my best with the effort, I learned a lot by it, and I'm pleased with how it turned out.

I can't say what Viridian may have done for you; that's up to you to judge. Since this is last Viridian note, however, I'd like to describe what Viridian did for me.

Since the halcyon days of 1999 my life has changed radically.

Rather than “thinking globally and acting locally,” as in the old futurist theme, I now live and think glocally. I once had a stable, settled life within a single city, state and nation. Nowadays, I divide my time between three different polities: the United States, the European Union and the Balkans. With various junkets elsewhere.

The 400-year-old Westphalian System doesn't approve of my lifestyle, although it's increasingly common, especially among people half my age. It's stressful to live glocally. Not that I myself feel stressed by this. As long as I've got broadband, I'm perfectly at ease with the fact that my position on the planet's surface is arbitrary. It's the nation-state system that is visibly stressed by these changes — it's freaking out over currency flows, migration through airports, offshoring, and similar phenomena.

I know that, by the cultural standards of the 20th century, my newfangled glocal lifestyle ought to bother me. I ought to feel deracinated, and I should suffer from culture shock, and I should stoically endure the mournful silence and exile of a writer torn from the kindly matrix of his national culture. A traditional story.

However, I've been at this life for years now; I really tried; the traditional regret is just not happening. Clearly the existence of the net has obliterated many former operational difficulties.

Furthermore, my sensibility no longer operates in that 20th-century framework. That's become an archaic way to feel, and I just can't get there from here.

Living on the entire planet at once is no longer a major challenge. It's got its practical drawbacks, but I'm much more perturbed about contemporary indignities such as airport

terrormoments, ATM surcharges and the open banditry of cellphone roaming. This is what's troublesome. The rest of it, I'm rather at ease about. Unless I'm physically restrained by some bureaucracy, I don't think I'm going to stop this globally nomadic life. I live on the Earth. The Earth is a planet. This fact is okay. I am living in truth.

Another major change came through my consumption habits. It pains me to see certain people still trying to live in hairshirt-green fashion — purportedly mindful, and thrifty and modest. I used to tolerate this eccentricity, but now that panicked bankers and venture capitalists are also trying to cling like leeches to every last shred of their wealth, I can finally see it as actively pernicious.

Hairshirt-green is the simple-minded inverse of 20th-century consumerism. Like the New Age mystic echo of Judaeo-Christianity, hairshirt-green simply changes the polarity of the dominant culture, without truly challenging it in any effective way. It doesn't do or say anything conceptually novel — nor is it practical, or a working path to a better life.

My personal relations to goods and services — especially goods — have been revolutionized since 1999. Let me try your patience by describing this change in some detail, because it really is a different mode of being in the world.

My design book SHAPING THINGS, which is very Viridian without coughing up that fact in a hairball, talks a lot about material objects as frozen social relationships within space and time. This conceptual approach may sound peculiar and alien, but it can be re-phrased in a simpler way.

What is “sustainability?” Sustainable practices navigate successfully through time and space, while others crack up and vanish. So basically, the sustainable is about time — time and space. You need to re-think your relationship to material possessions in terms of things that

occupy your time. The things that are physically closest to you. Time and space.

In earlier, less technically advanced eras, this approach would have been far-fetched. Material goods were inherently difficult to produce, find, and ship. They were rare and precious. They were closely associated with social prestige. Without important material signifiers such as wedding china, family silver, portraits, a coach-house, a trousseau and so forth, you were advertising your lack of substance to your neighbors. If you failed to surround yourself with a thick material barrier, you were inviting social abuse and possible police suspicion. So it made pragmatic sense to cling to heirlooms, renew all major purchases promptly, and visibly keep up with the Joneses.

That era is dying. It's not only dying, but the assumptions behind that form of material culture are very dangerous. These objects can no longer protect you from want, from humiliation — in fact they are causes of humiliation, as anyone with a McMansion crammed with Chinese-made goods and an unsellable SUV has now learned at great cost.

Furthermore, many of these objects can damage you personally. The hours you waste stumbling over your piled debris, picking, washing, storing, re-storing, those are hours and spaces that you will never get back in a mortal lifetime. Basically, you have to curate these goods: heat them, cool them, protect them from humidity and vermin. Every moment you devote to them is lost to your children, your friends, your society, yourself.

It's not bad to own fine things that you like. What you need are things that you GENUINELY like. Things that you cherish, that enhance your existence in the world. The rest is dross.

Do not “economize.” Please. That is not the point. The economy is clearly insane. Even its champions are terrified by it now. It's melting the North Pole. So “economization” is not your

friend. Cheapness can be value-less. Voluntary simplicity is, furthermore, boring. Less can become too much work.

The items that you use incessantly, the items you employ every day, the normal, boring goods that don't seem luxurious or romantic: these are the critical ones. They are truly central. The everyday object is the monarch of all objects. It's in your time most, it's in your space most. It is "where it is at," and it is "what is going on."

It takes a while to get this through your head, because it's the opposite of the legendry of shopping. However: the things that you use every day should be the best-designed things you can get. For instance, you cannot possibly spend too much money on a bed — (assuming you have a regular bed, which in point of fact I do not). You're spending a third of your lifetime in a bed. Your bed might be sagging, ugly, groaning and infested with dust mites, because you are used to that situation and cannot see it. That calamity might escape your conscious notice. See it. Replace it.

Sell — even give away — anything you never use. Fancy ball gowns, tuxedos, beautiful shoes wrapped in bubblepak that you never wear, useless Christmas gifts from well-meaning relatives, junk that you inherited. Sell that stuff. Take the money, get a real bed. Get radically improved everyday things.

The same goes for a working chair. Notice it. Take action. Bad chairs can seriously injure you from repetitive stresses. Get a decent ergonomic chair. Someone may accuse you of "indulging yourself" because you possess a chair that functions properly. This guy is a reactionary. He is useless to futurity. Listen carefully to whatever else he says, and do the opposite. You will benefit greatly.

Expensive clothing is generally designed to make you look like an aristocrat who can afford couture. Unless you are a celebrity on

professional display, forget this consumer theatricality. You should buy relatively-expensive clothing that is ergonomic, high-performance and sturdy.

Anything placed next to your skin for long periods is of high priority. Shoes are notorious sources of pain and stress and subjected to great mechanical wear. You really need to work on selecting these — yes, on "shopping for shoes." You should spend more time on shoes than you do on cars, unless you're in a car during pretty much every waking moment. In which case, God help you.

I strongly recommend that you carry a multitool. There are dozens of species of these remarkable devices now, and for good reason. Do not show them off in a backpack, because this marks you as a poorly-socialized geek. Keep your multitool hidden in the same discreet way that you would any other set of keys.

That's because a multitool IS a set of keys. It's a set of possible creative interventions in your immediate material environment. That is why you want a multitool. They are empowering.

A multitool changes your perceptions of the world. Since you lack your previous untooled learned-helplessness, you will slowly find yourself becoming more capable and more observant. If you have pocket-scissors, you will notice loose threads; if you have a small knife you will notice bad packaging; if you have a file you will notice flashing, metallic burrs, and bad joinery. If you have tweezers you can help injured children, while if you have a pen, you will take notes. Tools in your space, saving your time. A multitool is a design education.

As a further important development, you will become known to your friends and colleagues as someone who is capable, useful and resourceful, rather than someone who is helpless, frustrated and visibly lacking in options. You should aspire to this better condition.

Do not lug around an enormous toolchest or a full set of post-earthquake gear unless you are Stewart Brand. Furthermore, unless you are a professional emergency worker, you can abstain from post-apocalyptic “bug-out bags” and omniscient heaps of survivalist rations. Do not stock the fort with tiresome, life-consuming, freeze-dried everything, unless you can clearly sense the visible approach of some massive, non-theoretical civil disorder. The clearest way to know that one of these is coming is that the rich people have left your area. If that’s the case, then, sure, go befriend the police and prepare to knuckle down.

Now to confront the possessions you already have. This will require serious design work, and this will be painful. It is a good idea to get a friend or several friends to help you.

You will need to divide your current possessions into four major categories.

- Beautiful things.
- Emotionally important things.
- Tools, devices, and appliances that efficiently perform a useful function.
- Everything else.

“Everything else” will be by far the largest category. Anything you have not touched, or seen, or thought about in a year — this very likely belongs in “everything else.”

You should document these things. Take their pictures, their identifying makers’ marks, barcodes, whatever, so that you can get them off eBay or Amazon if, for some weird reason, you ever need them again. Store those digital pictures somewhere safe — along with all your other increasingly valuable, life-central digital data. Back them up both onsite and offsite.

Then remove them from your time and space. “Everything else” should not be in your immediate environment, sucking up your energy and reducing your opportunities. It should become a fond memory, or become reduced to data.

It may belong to you, but it does not belong with you. You weren’t born with it. You won’t be buried with it. It needs to be out of the space-time vicinity. You are not its archivist or quartermaster. Stop serving that unpaid role.

Beautiful things are important. If they’re truly beautiful, they should be so beautiful that you are showing them to people. They should be on display: you should be sharing their beauty with others. Your pride in these things should enhance your life, your sense of taste and perhaps your social standing.

They’re not really that beautiful? Then they’re not really beautiful. Take a picture of them, tag them, remove them elsewhere.

Emotionally important things. All of us have sentimental keepsakes that we can’t bear to part with. We also have many other objects which simply provoke a panicky sense of potential loss — they don’t help us to establish who we are, or to become the person we want to be. They subject us to emotional blackmail.

Is this keepsake so very important that you would want to share its story with your friends, your children, your grandchildren? Or are you just using this clutter as emotional insulation, so as to protect yourself from knowing yourself better?

Think about that. Take a picture. You might want to write the story down. Then — yes — away with it.

You are not “losing things” by these acts of material hygiene. You are gaining time, health, light and space. Also, the basic quality of your daily life will certainly soar. Because the benefits of good design will accrue to you where they matter — in the everyday.

Not in Oz or in some museum vitrine. In the every day. For sustainability, it is every day that matters. Not green Manhattan Projects, green moon shots, green New Years’ resolutions, or wild scifi speculations. Those are for dabblers

and amateurs. The sustainable is about the every day.

Now for category three, tools and appliances. They're not beautiful and you are not emotionally attached to them. So they should be held to keen technical standards.

Is your home a museum? Do you have curatorial skills? If not, then entropy is attacking everything in there. Stuff breaks, ages, rusts, wears out, decays. Entropy is an inherent property of time and space. Understand this fact. Expect this. The laws of physics are all right, they should not provoke anguished spasms of denial.

You will be told that you should "make do" with broken or semi-broken tools, devices and appliances. Unless you are in prison or genuinely crushed by poverty, do not do this. This advice is wicked.

This material culture of today is not sustainable. Most of the things you own are almost certainly made to 20th century standards, which are very bad. If we stick with the malignant possessions we already have, through some hairshirt notion of thrift, then we are going to be baling seawater. This will not do.

You should be planning, expecting, desiring to live among material surroundings created, manufactured, distributed, through radically different methods from today's. It is your moral duty to aid this transformative process. This means you should encourage the best industrial design.

Get excellent tools and appliances. Not a hundred bad, cheap, easy ones. Get the genuinely good ones. Work at it. Pay some attention here, do not neglect the issue by imagining yourself to be serenely "non-materialistic." There is nothing more "materialistic" than doing the same household job five times because your tools suck. Do not allow yourself to be trapped in time-sucking black holes of mechanical dysfunction. That is not civilized.

Now for a brief homily on tools and appliances of especial Viridian interest: the experimental ones. The world is full of complicated, time-sucking, partially-functional beta-rollout gizmos. Some are fun to mess with; fun in life is important. Others are whimsical; whimsy is okay. Eagerly collecting semifunctional gadgets because they are shiny-shiny, this activity is not the worst thing in the world. However, it can become a vice. If you are going to wrangle with unstable, poorly-defined, avant-garde tech objects, then you really need to wrangle them. Get good at doing it.

Good experiments are well-designed experiments. Real experiments need a theory. They need something to prove or disprove. Experiments need to be slotted into some larger context of research, and their results need to be communicated to other practitioners. That's what makes them true "experiments" instead of private fetishes.

If you're buying weird tech gizmos, you need to know what you are trying to prove by that. You also need to tell other people useful things about it. If you are truly experimenting, then you are doing something praiseworthy. You may be wasting some space and time, but you'll be saving space and time for others less adventurous. Good.

If you're becoming a techie magpie packrat who never leaves your couch — that's not good. Forget the shiny gadget. You need to look in the shiny mirror.

So. This approach seems to be working for me. More or less. I'm not urging you to do any of this right away. Do not jump up from the screen right now and go reform your entire material circumstances. That resolve will not last. Because it's not sustainable.

Instead, I am urging you to think hard about it. Tuck it into the back of your mind. Contemplate it. The day is going to come, it will come,

when you suddenly find your comfortable habits disrupted.

That could be a new job, a transfer to a new city, a marriage, the birth or departure of a child. It could be a death in the family: we are mortal, they happen. Moments like these are part of the human condition. Suddenly you will find yourself facing a yawning door and a whole bunch of empty boxes. That is the moment in which you should launch this sudden, much-considered coup. Seize that moment on the barricades, liberate yourself, and establish a new and sustainable constitution.

But — you may well ask — what if I backslide into the ancien regime? Well, there is a form of hygiene workable here as well. Every time you move some new object into your time and space — buy it, receive it as a gift, inherit it, whatever — remove some equivalent object.

That discipline is not as hard as it sounds. As the design of your immediate surroundings improves, it'll become obvious to you that more and more of these time-sucking barnacles are just not up to your standards. They're ugly, or they're broken, or they're obsolete, or they are visible emblems of nasty, uncivilized material processes.

Their blissful absence from your life makes new time and space for something better for you — and for the changed world you want to live to see.

So: that summarizes it. Forgive the Pope-Emperor this last comprehensive sermon; it is what I learned by doing all this, and you won't be troubled henceforth.

Now. If you've read this far, you're a diehard. So you may be interested in my next, post-Viridian, project. And yes, of course I have one. It's not so direct, confrontational and strident as the Viridian Movement; instead, it suits a guy of my increasingly scholastic and professorial temperament.

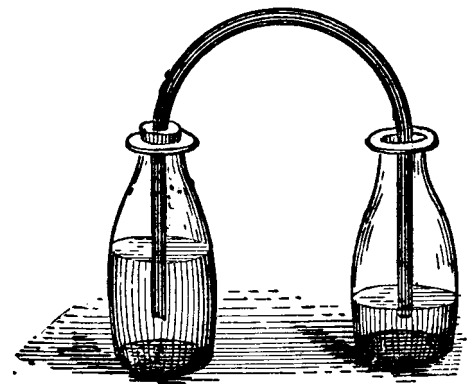
Viridian “imaginary products” were always a major theme of ours, and, since I'm both a science fiction writer and a design critic, I want to do some innovative work in this space — yes, the realm of imaginary products. Conceptual designs; imaginary designs; critical designs; fantastic and impossible designs.

This new effort of mine is a scholarly work exploring material culture, use-value, ethics, and the relationship between materiality and the imagination. However, since nobody's easily interested in that huge, grandiose topic, I'm disguising it as a nifty and attractive gadget book. I plan to call it “The User's Guide to Imaginary Gadgets.”

My first step in composing this new book is to methodically survey the space of all possible imaginary gadgets. It's rather like the exploratory work of “Dead Media Project.”

I'm not yet sure what form this new research effort will take. There will likely be a mailing list. I may be turning my Wired blog into something of a gadget site. There might be a wiki or a social network, depending on who wants to help me, and what they want out of that effort. Still: “design fiction,” “critical design,” “futurist scenario design,” and the personal, individual, pocket-and-purse sized approach to post-industriality: this is something I need to know a lot more about.

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Sustainable Graphic Design

The Designer As Sustainabilist

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