

# The Designer's Dilemma

by Valerie Casey

*The Designers Accord, launched in 2007, calls the creative community to environmental and humanitarian stewardship. Reprising our Fall 2008 theme, Accord founder Valerie Casey discusses its commitment to networking and iterative change as a path to making sustainability the norm in the global marketplace. What's hopeful and inspiring is that her vision now has more than 150,000 supporters from 100 countries and across all design disciplines.*

Elisha Otis did not invent the elevator.

Elisha Otis did create the safety catch that would prevent a vertically mobile enclosure from plummeting from great heights to great depths at very high speeds, injuring its passengers. This invention was demonstrated at the 1853 World's Fair in New York, almost 5,000 years after the elevator first came into being.

So no—technically, Otis did not invent the elevator, although he is regularly credited with it. But it was his incremental improvement to an existing technology that launched what we now know as the elevator industry, the great facilitator of skyscraping cities, of vertical living, working, and buying.

Otis exemplifies what I call the designer's dilemma: Is there greater value in inventing or improving? If the



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designer's role is to drive innovation on a large scale, how can we resolve ourselves to the incremental improvements that are necessitated by today's increasingly complex culture? How do we stage and amplify the effect of the small changes we make over time so that they create impact that scales?

These questions are now more relevant than ever. There is no single innovation that can counteract the innumerable injuries we have done to the global ecosystem. Making small interventions at the right leverage points often creates world-changing effects. But if the key to tackling our environmental and social challenges lies within this world of iterative change and cumulative improvement—and I believe it does—then what does this mean for design as a whole?

### Cultural pressures for radical change

An oversaturated consumer market and increasingly sophisticated end user have made it difficult to differentiate products and services in today's economy. Design has become the *de facto* solution for pursuing and owning the habits and routines of consumers. So strident is the competition for shelf space and mindshare that incremental improvement is often thought akin to colossal failure. While designers excel at making the subtle modifications that shape everyday experiences, in this competitive climate we are compelled to pursue the next big thing with great ferocity. We seek change in the radical sense—paradigm shifts, "phoenix" products, dot-something Web landmarks. And success has a short memory; we are measured only by our most recent achievement—the last to market, the most recent award winner, the latest *bon mot* by a journalist or blogger.

It is a challenge, then, that in this time of fierce competition, economic turmoil, and creative pressure, we are pummeled by the tsunami of all things sustainable. Since the term became embedded in the cultural vernacular a few years ago, *sustainability* has been lifted out of the "green" ghetto to reference a more holistic and meaningful consideration of people, profits, and planet. And because it is virtually impossible to avoid the perfect storm of human tragedies, corporate bailouts, and global warming, our

contemporary currency is our fluency with this triple bottom line.

So in this time of transformation, when new thinking is critical, why has the creative community not been proactive with new solutions and roadmaps for change? In fact, just as the market pressures us to create more sole-source design contributions, it has become obvious that the key to meaningfully addressing sustainability is through additive change—continual improvement rather than discrete, piecemeal invention. This situation demands that the creative community respond with more solutions than hand-cranked cell phones, recycled packaging effects, and resin-seeped recovered garbage art pieces. There is no magic bullet, no single "Aha" moment, no iPod of sustainability. At this cultural inflection point, we need to do more than create niche products and marketing campaigns. We need to do more than play corporate catch-up or throw our hats into the ever-enlarged PR ring of greenwashing. Instead, we need to focus on ways to create the conditions for change; we need to stimulate mass change.

### When in deep waters, become a diver

In the same way we approach design challenges—not by purporting to have all the answers, but instead by assuredly asking the right questions—we must recognize that we



Until now, cost, appearance, and the complexity of installation raised barriers to consumer acceptance of solar energy. The Solar Roofing System (SRS), developed by Philadelphia product development firm Bresslergroup, addresses these problems with a patented photovoltaic package that allows electricity to be generated through a long-lasting roofing system that costs, looks, and installs like a typical high-quality blue-glazed ceramic tile roof. "Plug and play" components transfer electricity from the roof to the house, or back to the grid for energy credits. The patented system won a 2008 IDEA award.

don't have the solution yet because our formula has been wrong. Our addiction to sweeping change has hobbled us from seeing the most obvious opportunities for improvement. In order to create a radical position around sustainability, we need to change our concept of design. Our first sustainable products must be ourselves.

Perhaps the most revolutionary characteristic of the environmental and social justice movement is its sheer scope. Activist Paul Hawken describes it as the largest and fastest-growing movement in the world, comprising more than 2 million organizations worldwide. This vast reach provides a great opportunity for facilitating change, but it also poses a unique set of challenges regarding the management and self-identity of such a broad, loosely connected network.

Designers are just one of many groups driving to make positive impact within this space. NGOs, commercial businesses, technologists, academics, and governments are all forging ahead with their individual visions, sharing the public's attention. Together, the many voices of this movement form a harmony deeper and more complex than any solo the lone designer can offer.

Yet, this is a new and uncomfortable space for many designers to occupy, indoctrinated as we are with the importance of differentiation and exclusivity. Until recently, we have succeeded in our differences, not our similarities. We are accustomed,

in many ways, to known boundaries. This is not to say that designers are not continuously pushing those boundaries and rewriting our own histories and futures, but rather that our design thinking tools and methods (narrative, motion, form, virtuality) have remained relatively constant. Even as our industry has evolved to integrate robust strategic and analytical perspectives, our jurisdiction has remained clear. Even as we engage in transformational thinking, build new business and brand models, and tackle human-interaction challenges in emerging economies, we are still designers.

Our clients expect our ability to translate research and ideation into tangible products and services. And they know we'll be able to differentiate them—at least for a while—from their competitors. But now we are not dealing with competitors, we are elbow-to-elbow with people who share our ethic, and to engage in the traditional competitive stance would be counterproductive. In a world where everything is connected and we all share common goals, how do we satisfy our deep instinct to create a unique position for ourselves?

We need a new strategy,

In July 2007, the "Kyoto Treaty" of design—a call to arms for the creative community around environmental and humanitarian stewardship—

## The Movement

The Designers Accord is made up of more than 150,000 members of the creative community representing 100 countries and each design discipline.

Almost every major design firm has adopted the Designers Accord. The list includes IDEO, frog design, Continuum, Smart Design, ZIBA, BMW Designworks, and Pentagram.

Corporate adopters include Autodesk, Adobe, Johnson & Johnson (Consumer Product Design), Steelcase, GOOD magazine, Sappi, Mohawk Paper, and New Leaf Paper.

Among the educational institutions that have adopted the Designers Accord: California College of the Arts, Savannah College of Art and Design, USC design department, Pratt, School of Design at Tecnologico de Monterrey, University of Art and Design Helsinki, and Swinburne University.

The leading American design organizations—AIGA, IDSA, and DMI—and the global organization of design colleges and universities, CUMULUS, endorse the Designers Accord.

The Designers Accord is a California not-for-profit, and was formed in July 2007.

was launched. Later renamed the Designers Accord, its five guidelines provided the structure for a cooperative model to accelerate our Industry's ability to create positive social and environmental impact.

As we redefine the role of design in this new world order, we must look to each other for ideas and inspiration. Individually tackling the challenges of sustainability is not sufficient. By pooling our knowledge, we can create a network in which every client and customer is compelled to engage in a discussion of sustainability—no matter which firm it selects, which corporation it partners with, or which university it hires its talent from. Together, we can advocate for the large and small improvements that will produce lasting change. Indeed, much of the attraction of the Designers Accord for corporations, schools, and design firms has been its ability to leverage universally shared philosophies within the creative network, while utilizing our diversity for complex problem-solving. There is an acute awareness that when we share a code of conduct, our small interventions in the system have large effects.

The creative community is not the only one changing its orientation. All industry is headed toward this new cooperative model. Collaboration is the key to creating impact. Precedents like the IBM-led Eco-Patent Commons (shared innovations aimed at environmental sustainability) and the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change (CLG) in the UK show an interesting inversion of previously proprietary content to open source content. And of course, technology also enables the use of distributed cognition to solve problems—the work of the X Prize Foundation and Google.org are great examples. The Designers Accord seeks to learn from both of these characteristics and leverage their best attributes: cooperation and networked intelligence.

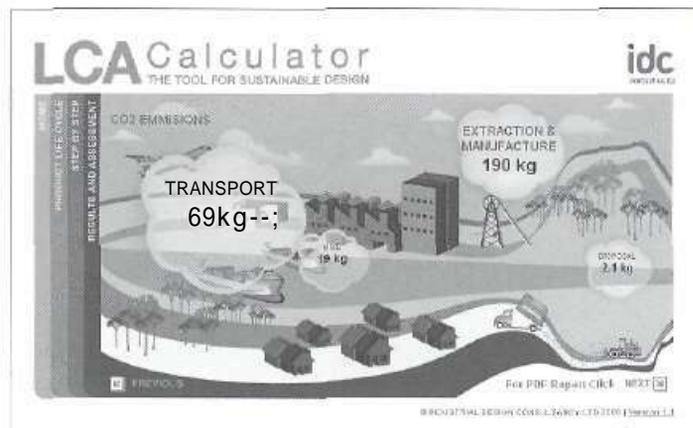
## The Basics of the Designers Accord

The vision of the Designers Accord is to integrate the principles of sustainability into all aspects of design practice and production. Our mission is to catalyze innovation throughout the creative community by collectively building our intelligence around issues of climate change and humanity, and tackling those challenges with optimism and creativity.

We advocate inverting the traditional model of competition, and encourage sharing best practices so that we can innovate more efficiently and quickly.

### We will:

- Ask all adopters to engage in conversation about social and environmental impact with every client and customer, and integrate sustainable alternatives in their work.
- Create a real-world and online network to enable conversation about opportunities and challenges in creating sustainable products, services, and businesses.



Developed by UK-based Industrial Design Consultancy (IDC), the Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) Calculator provides a free, easy-to-use tool to assess the environmental impact of a product by calculating its energy input and carbon output from cradle to grave. To see the LCA Calculator and to use it for free, go to [www.lcacalculator.com](http://www.lcacalculator.com).

## The guidelines

Although this movement began with a focus on the design community, we were soon joined by a set of proactive educational institutions and corporations. All of these organizations believed that if we describe sustainability as an optional line item\_\_adjacent to traditional product design, service, and digital media design offerings—we only marginalize the issue. To effect real change, we need to apply a lens of sustainability to all our activities, not some of them. Literaql' around these issues needs to be fully assimilated within the entire design process, across the entire field, and industry.

In the spirit of this philosophy, our group of designers, educators, and business leaders commit to these principles:

- O Publicly declare participation in the Designers Accord.
- O Initiate a dialogue about environmental and social impact and sustainable alternatives with every client and customer. Rework contracts to favor environmentally and socially responsible work processes. Provide strategic and material alternatives for sustainable design,
- O Undertake a program to educate your teams about sustainability and sustainable design.
- O Consider your ethical footprint. Begin by measuring the carbon/greenhouse gas footprint of your organization, and pledge to reduce your footprint annually.
- O Advance the understanding of environmental and social issues from a design perspective by actively contributing to the communal knowledge base for sustainable design.

In less than two years, the Designers Accord has grown from a series of sidebar conversations around these issues in design studios, conference rooms, and classrooms across the globe to a movement of more than 150,000 people from 100 countries, representing all design disciplines.

Clearly, the Designers Accord has tapped into a desire to embrace sustainability that was simmering just below the surface of the creative community. Our opportunity now is to harness this momentum to continue to create the conditions for deliberate cooperation and problem-solving. The complex interdependences of our industry requires that we cooperate under a new type of arrangement—one that rethinks the self-interested goals of our industry, our personal egos, and our age-old methods of reward.

We are in the throes of a global environmental, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Everything we know is inverted. Everything we rested our beliefs on is cast in a new light. Change happens fast, and we need to act quickly. We are revisiting our practices, our methods, and our philosophies. We are talking to each other. We are leaving our egos behind.

I truly believe that the creative community has a responsibility to create the conversations to address these issues, and to make the interventions that will inspire a new world order. Because of our values, the way we think and problem-solve, our ability to see the relationships between and among things, we have the most prepared minds to take on these challenges.

If you are ready for change, join the thousands and thousands of designers, educators, students, and corporate leaders who believe in our potential to make change. Be part of the Designers Accord (<http://www.designersaccord.org>)! M

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