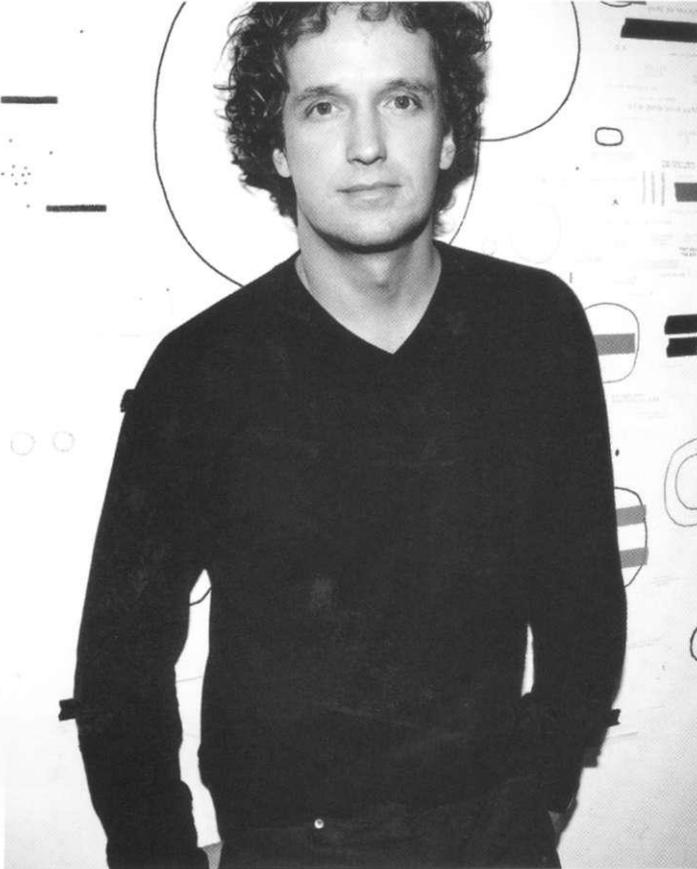


# LIGHTING THE FUSE



Yves Béhar is hot. He and his team at fuseproject are relentlessly rethinking our everyday lives, transforming mundane objects into experiences that spark delight and imagination, such as Puma's "Clever Little Bag" shoebox, One Laptop Per Child, and the PACT underwear brand. Sustainability is integral to the company's design ethos, and Béhar is impassioned and ambitious about what designers can and should do in this realm. He aims not merely to design inspiring projects for companies but to redesign their very systems of logistics, production, and distribution themselves.

Yves Béhar founded fuseproject in 1999 to develop "cohesive brand and product experiences."

You've been doing pioneering, avant-garde work in sustainability. Why? Why is sustainability important?

In the long term, it's pretty obvious why sustainability is important—because of the environmental implications. But in the short term, it's important, because that's what people want. They don't want sustainability by sacrificing anything, and they don't want it by having something that's "less" than the original or the "pre-sustainability" experience.

And what's the significance of sustainability to the design world?

The reason why sustainability is important to designers in general is the fact that it is our opportunity to apply design at a larger scale, and *deeper* scale. It allows us to work in ways that are a lot less superficial and a lot more about rethinking the way business is done.

I'll use the example of the Puma shoebox. We could never have made such a

drastic change if we had proposed superficial change. The Puma shoebox has become the model for the company, and we're working on many other applications of the same principles across all the areas of packaging and logistics of the company. Puma is essentially redoing its distribution and logistics system.

The compelling argument was that not only is the design interesting, different, and good branding for Puma, but it is also a *dramatic* improvement.

Sustainable design becomes one of the strongest convincing arguments we have as designers to create the kind of radical deep change that we always want to have on the industries we work with. It's a huge opportunity for us to propose things to our clients that go beyond the original brief, and capture the full potential of what it's possible for them to do.

If sustainability involves redesigning the whole manufacturing and distribution sys-

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Through innovative construction and production, Puma's Clever Little Bag significantly reduces resource consumption.



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**“ WHAT WE’VE FOUND IS THAT EVERY INDUSTRY, AND EVERY TYPE OF PRODUCT, NEEDS ITS OWN REINVENTION.**

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tem, how do designers establish legitimacy for themselves in that aspect of design? Designers are very good at establishing legitimacy for themselves in fields that are new, such as strategy or branding, for example. The way we establish legitimacy for ourselves in that particular field is by bringing creative solutions to the table that are all-encompassing rather than just about changing a material or two. We do that by inserting ourselves within all aspects of production and distribution our clients are involved with. By visiting factories in China and distribution centers around the world, and meeting with retailers, we're able to have a full picture of what the opportunities may be, which, typically, designers don't have. When we use that knowledge to influence our design, a lot of innovation can happen.

In addition to your work for a big brand like Puma, you've helped launch PACT, a sustainable fashion underwear brand. Yes, we also do work that I call "eco-design ventures." At the start-up scale, it allows us to essentially prove out some theories with small-size businesses and challenge the status quo in certain industries. We're focused on working with entrepreneurs and finding areas in the market where there is real opportunity, and where not a lot has happened in many years. We've shown, for example, what the model for a sustainable under-

wear company would look like—that's PACT—and we're growing that company.

Through all this work for different companies, what have you found to be some of the key points about sustainable design? The key for me is to make sure that the projects we work on aren't purely theoretical. People have heard plenty of theory about sustainability or how to go green, and have certainly grown a little wary of it. I believe in what we do being executed into reality, for it to become a pathway for others to follow.

The second point is what I call "don't apologize"—which means that we don't create designs that are apologies of the original. There's this idea that because they're green, they're less than the original: Less exciting, less beautiful, less of a consumer experience than the original version. There are many examples of products that tend to deliver less and charge more for being green. Design can change that.

How do you determine the most sustainable approach for a particular project? I don't think sustainable design or green design is ever going to be a rigid standard like ISO 9004 where you go through a checklist and get to a formula in order to achieve a particular standard. What we've found is that every industry, and every type of product, needs its own

reinvention. The ideas and criteria are completely different when you're working on a task chair for Herman Miller compared to, say, a shoebox for Puma.

Also, it's important to acknowledge that these solutions we're working on now are very important steps, but belong in a continuum of progress. They're big improvements, but at this stage of sustainability design, they're not final.

The connection between design and narrative is a core component of your work. What do you do to get consumers really excited about that narrative, about sustainability and sustainable design in particular?

What we find exciting is when we can create the kind of surprise and the kind of product experience that almost transcends the notion of "this is sustainable." People are absolutely, completely delighted with the product, with how it feels and how they use it. The sustainability aspect is certainly apparent, but it's not the primary and only reason why they would purchase something.

It's crucial for us to design in such a way that we're continuing the same kind of excitement that people have when purchasing a new product. When people get our line of underwear, they're excited because they're getting something colorful and they're getting a great fit. They're also getting a great story and packaging,



PACT underwear, made from organic cotton, is dyed without heavy metal inks and shipped in a compostable bag.

**“ OUR DESIGN NEEDS TO BE BEAUTIFUL, IT NEEDS TO DELIGHT, AND IT NEEDS TO BE SUSTAINABLE AT THE SAME TIME—WE ARE READY TO TAKE ON THAT VERY COMPLEX EQUATION.**

and it happens that all of it has been thought about and executed most deeply around sustainability principles. That tends to surprise and further delight people—but it isn't the central premise upon which the product is presented.

The Puma project has a lot of subtle design aspects—you didn't use any laminated printing on the box, and the cardboard is die-cut from one flat piece of material, an elegant way of reducing waste. How have you become so knowledgeable about working in this way?

At fuseproject, we work on such a cross-disciplinary range of projects. A lot of things that we work on involve soft materials such as fabric, and the team has a fascination for origami. These kinds of tools cover a much wider spectrum than just the 2-D tools that focus on how you print, laminate, emboss, or foil something. These are the skills of graphic designers when they join our team, and what they get to develop over a series of projects is the sense of how that third engineering dimension, that industrial design sensibility, actually can add to the projects and the solutions.

We don't start just from a 2-D approach, we start with a full 3-D approach. We know that the heavy red printing on the original shoebox is certainly an environmental burden, and then we look at it and say, "Well, the choice is that Puma

is going to ship brown boxes." From a branding standpoint, that's not really acceptable when you've had 10 years of everybody seeing your bright red shoeboxes in the stores. So we have to realize that those two elements are very important, and we have to examine how we can reconcile them. And we find that that the 3-D element helps us in doing so.

Can you talk about other specific innovations involved in the box?

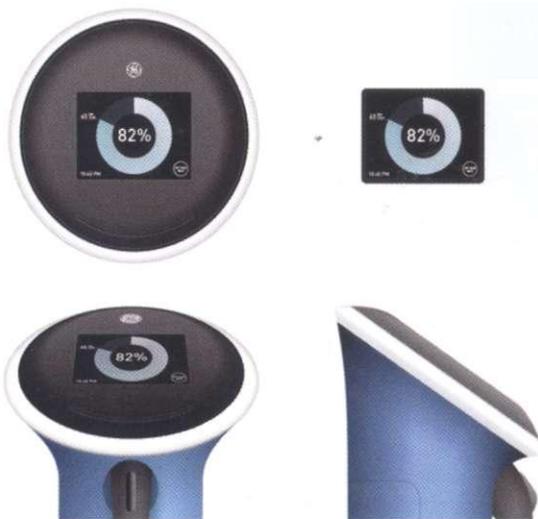
The cardboard itself gains its shape through a kind of origami, and it's extremely light and recycled cardboard. We reuse all the offcuts to mold little shoe inserts, which are used to protect the shoes, so we don't have to use any tissue paper. We then use a recycled PET bag to essentially create the structural integrity, which the cardboard is too light to provide. The box helps us with creating a geometry that can be easily stacked, and the fabric material makes the cardboard structural by simply holding it in place. That kind of layering and that kind of intelligence comes from the fact that we work in 3-D and in 2-D at the same time. We don't just look at 2-D planes, we look at what the planes are made of and how they can be composed into more intelligent structures.

In your TED talk a couple years ago, you spoke about how a designer can influence

the social values of an organization. How can designers be effective in that? Ten or 15 years ago, one of the main debates about design was, "Well, it's nice, but does it really create value—does it really make businesses successful?" That was long before Apple passed Microsoft in shareholder value. It's clear that design has a big role in creating the kind of value that Apple has achieved—I think we've proven that point.

Now we live in a time when people are directly reviewing and judging products as a part of the social-media revolution that we live in. They're also discussing a company's overall impact—not just how good their products are, which is the critical issue that we're being brought on as designers to solve—but also what is the sum positive and negative of a company's output. We're in the eye of that storm as well, because a lot of the choices we make give us the opportunity to reassess the way some things are done. We have a lot of power now both in the strategy and execution of what we work on. We influence the values that are becoming an important part of how consumers evaluate a company.

You designed the Y Water bottle so that it can be reused as a toy, and the Canal Plus cable electronics box so that it can be refurbished. What do you think are a designer's responsibilities in creating this



GE's WattStation, a charging station for electric vehicles.

more expansive notion of eliminating waste entirely?

I think we're in the very beginnings of what seems to me like a sea change, so we're helping others peer into the possibilities—of reuse, of refurbishment. And I do think companies, businesses, and the public are very interested in these. Reuse and participation are very important ideas to me. Participation is the next step: Storytelling is a way to start to engage with people, and then participation is the way for people to take that engagement and then live it themselves.

Can you give a specific example?

In the case of the Clever Little Bag, there is a sense that people are participating in the effort. It isn't just another shoebox that they would discard immediately upon purchase. It's actually a whole, completely different experience. Since the handle is already part of the packaging, they don't need the big vinyl plastic bag that they would typically get from the retailer. They get to reuse the bag, either for their shoes or for other things. We have a whole website and a whole community of people that are showing all the funny, funky ways they reuse the bag for other purposes. So allowing them to participate in a way that gets them to say, "Wow, I never thought this could be this engaging—I never thought that this could do more in my life rather than just

being a story about 'less.'" That is one of the things that we believe makes each project successful on a consumer level.

You've said if a design isn't ethical, it can't be beautiful. How does that apply to sustainability?

The second part of the sentence is that "if it isn't beautiful, then it shouldn't be at all." So if you look at the entirety of the statement, you realize that we are ready to take on that very complex equation—which is that our design needs to be beautiful, it needs to delight, and it needs to be sustainable at the same time. We take the challenge straight on.

You've described the contemporary period of design as "a radical time of change." As a designer, how do you navigate that?

In recent years, we've seen a dramatic change from the way brands were built and communicated in the past. Nowadays, consumers trust each other. Statistically, it's incredible. Seventy-eight percent of consumers say they trust peer recommendations, versus 14 percent who trust advertisements. So what does that say about all the ways that products have been promoted? What does it say about all the ways that brands have been shepherded over the years by marketing and advertising?

So this is a time of revolution—and we have to continue that role of having one

foot in our clients' meeting rooms and the other foot in the world. We have to understand what people are expecting and know how to execute on those expectations. People now have a direct way to communicate, evaluate, and make decisions about products—a company's values are being discussed peer-to-peer. I believe we're being put back in the driver's seat—or we will be put back in the driver's seat—when it comes to the shepherding of brands.

What's your sense of how design storytelling has been evolving in recent years?

For me, the notion of storytelling and the ideas have always been so central to our work, but what I've realized is that what we do as designers is to accelerate the adoption of ideas. Let's say there's an idea out there that charging your vehicle at home or charging your vehicle on the street is a practical, easy thing to do—but it's just an idea, just a conversation. By demonstrating that it actually is going to be a delightful experience, or that it is going to have a small amount of visual impact on the urban landscape, then that idea is accelerated in people's minds. People think, "That's something I want. That's something I can live with." Later they'll think, "I'm certainly not missing the trip to the gas station." We can actualize these ideas and, hence, accelerate their adoption.