

THE INTERNATIONAL DESIGN MAGAZINE — **The I.D. 40** ... plus What Droid Really Does ... Too Much Design Thinking? ... Reimagining the Bay Bridge ... Nike's Considered Program ... Against Sustainability
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I.D.

40 Transformative Design Projects And the people behind them*

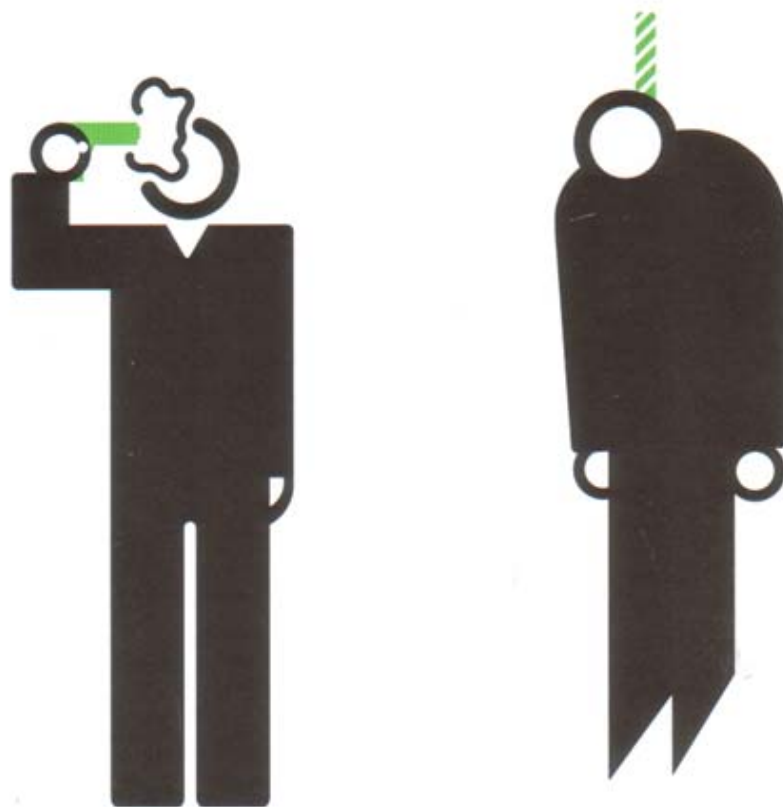


*Like the Dutch design laboratory Supermaker, page 60



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By John May
Illustration by Toposgraphics

Against Sustainability

Before we can begin a meaningful discussion of sustainability, we must acknowledge its faulty framework.

Once upon a time, there was a tribe that believed it had discovered a means of improving its people's lives. It employed these means, and life improved. For many generations, its descendants followed suit, believing that life would become better still. Then one day they realized the

very ideas, practices, and tools that had been improving their lives were quietly degrading certain conditions required for their continued existence.

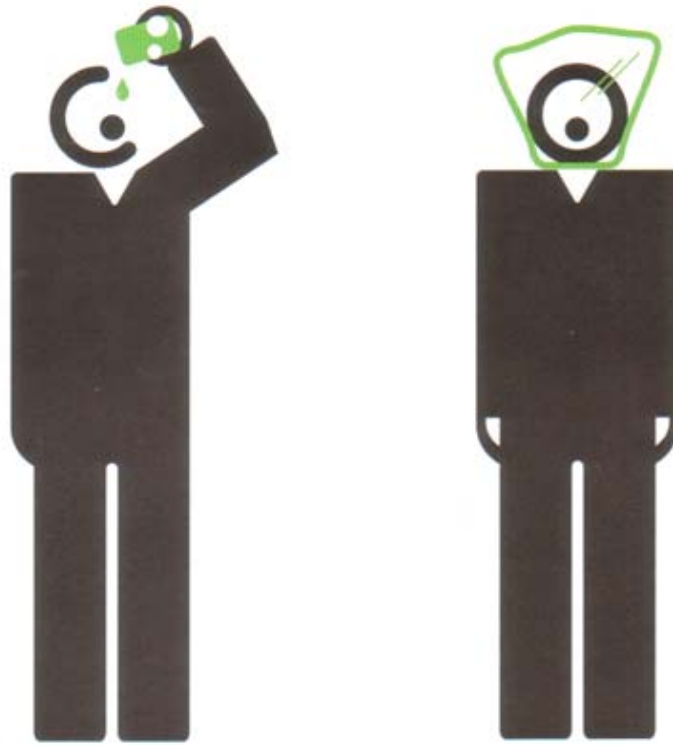
This is where we find ourselves today. Life has become more comfortable for many of us, but at a considerable and mounting cost. If we are to somehow escape this cycle, we must recognize that modernity has proved exceptionally good at producing theoretical blind alleys, and that any discourse on sustainability must avoid the trap of becoming yet another modern solution.

We've seen how easily sustainability can be undermined: Poland Spring's "eco-shaped" plastic water bottle, Cadillac's hybrid-electric Escalade, Chevron's asking if we are "ready to be part of the solution." No doubt the charm of green consumerism lies in its ability to link enlightenment, liberation, and gratification, producing a fiction in which consumption negates its own impacts. These perversions are so easy to carry out because the current discussion of sustainability is both conceptually incoherent and politically inadequate.

Even its general definitions slip the chains of logic by doubling back on themselves. From Jason McLennan's popular *The Philosophy of Sustainable Design*, for example: Sustainable design aims to "eliminate completely through skillful, sensitive design the environmental impact of the physical objects and services of the built environment." The circularity would be comical if it weren't so disquieting.

Sustainability is difficult to critique not because it presents an unassailable set of principles, but because it is so shapeless and empty that it is nearly impossible to locate. Like pornography or obscenity, sustainable design is evidently so obvious that it needs no clear definition.

To begin any truly coherent discourse of sustainability, design must acknowledge several overlapping conditions. First, there is our problem of objects—the notion that we inhabit a world composed primarily of things rather than one of innumerable processes spanning extraction, production, consumption, and degradation. By and large, the design mind remains fixated on



those brief moments when the object assumes its preordained form: the product. Too often neglected are the tremendous expenditures of energy and resources that are marshaled toward its formation and the handling of its synthetic corpse.

Linked to this is the problem of newness. The life span of the manufactured product has, since the 1970s, been exponentially reduced through explicit design strategies, erasing an entire collective psychology of durability in a single generation. Newness itself has been the chief product of the advertising and branding industries for nearly a half a century. Designers have been sold on, and have helped sell, not just disposable goods but also the idea of disposability.

These problems find their alibi in our blindness to a larger issue: the problem of externalization. Buried beneath the boosterism of “green infrastructures” lies the historical fact that the effective distribution of modernity’s many wonders (clean water, cool air, glossy products) has always depended on externalizing its by-products

to an imagined “outside”: the inner city, the rural hinterlands, the global south, the upper atmosphere, the inner lung. In material terms, these accumulations always outpace the pleasures. Landfills leak toxins, asthma rates soar in cities, strange ecologies form at coastal sewage outlets.

Among the many gifts left us by the late Max Sebald was a lengthy work of poetry entitled *After Nature*—a most unnerving and elusive phrase. As always, a certain mystery surrounds Sebald’s language. Does the title indicate a romanticist’s impulse, as when a sonata is composed “after Mozart” or a play written “after Brecht?” Or is he describing a point in time after which nature is no longer a sensible referent? If the latter, the poem becomes a kind of eulogy, a last rite for a natural world that has disappeared before our eyes. I prefer another, more hopeful reading, in which what has passed away is not nature itself but the idea that the natural world can be measured, managed, and organized through technology into resources. It’s an idea that continues to justify and nourish

our misguided engineering dreams, which remain so blind to the past, to the endless list of failed projects and well-planned solutions that continue to go awry.

The current discourse on sustainable design rings hollow because we have barely begun to acknowledge the consequences of our modern methods, and already we have ceded too much ground to intellectual confusion and the smooth concision of greenwashing campaigns. Sustainability today is more image than theory or politics, and design must confront its complicity with this image of a world “sustained” by incessant innovation, responsible purchasing, and efficient infrastructures. Until then, sustainability will remain little more than a glossy media avatar of domestic modernism perfected, of life swaddled in the soft, stylish comforts of a well-fertilized Petrochemical Green. A Perpetually New Green. A Suicidal Green.

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