

Sustainability in Strategy

—Kurt Culbertson

The focus on building “green” and green products is now ubiquitous. Builders, designers, corporations, and even individuals are at least giving sustainability lip service and at best making every effort to obtain LEEDS certification for their projects. Designing or building green is no longer a distinguishing factor in the marketplace – it is expected and often demanded.

There have been great strides in ensuring that current generations can meet their needs without compromising future generations. And although vital and deserved of the current attention and positive response, the environment is only one part of sustainability. Now it’s time to expand our focus and raise the bar.

There are much bigger challenges and opportunities that face our society. The Brundtland Commission, formerly the World Commission on Environment and Development, created a broader definition of sustainability, one that encompassed economic and social aspects of development. And writers such as Jeffrey Sachs and Hernando

De Soto see raising the economic well-being of all peoples as essential to improving the world’s environmental condition.

Companies in the forefront of design and development have an obligation to inform, excite, and command more from their clients than simply building green.

To the traditional aspects of the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable design — economics, environment, and community, a fourth dimension needs to be added: Art. Applying this synthesis to every project in a transparent and holistic fashion

will yield more profound results from the planning and design effort.

Economics is about the fiscal impact of development.

We at Design Workshop have embraced a philosophy we call Legacy Design, which speaks to the full spectrum of design. It says that if designers merge environmental concerns with economic responsibility, community sensitivity, and art, magical places result. These places are sustainable areas of beauty, significance, and quality that lift the spirit.

Environment

Human existence depends on recognizing the value of natural systems and organizing our activities to protect them. Design should fit purpose to the conditions of the land in ways that support future generations, driving value long-term. The concept of protecting the environment must be expanded from “first, do no harm” to a commitment to enhance the natural

environment or restore it to its natural state.

Economics

Economics is not just about the client making money — it’s about the fiscal impact of development. It’s about creating designs intended to advance the economic well-being of communities while protecting and enhancing ecological systems. The flow of capital required to develop a project and the capital generated over its life defines economic viability. Projects need long-term economic mechanisms to promote and protect the integrity of a place. The economics of a project must be calculated based on the project’s impact on a wide variety of indicators across all socioeconomic segments of a community: employment rates, home ownership rates, housing/jobs balance, real estate values, local business ownership rates, business valuations, worker productivity, energy efficiency, waste reduction, availability of affordable housing, health care, and quality public education. Does the tax base support the services

necessary to keep the community safe and in good repair? Are there good schools, churches, and artistic amenities that nurture the community? If so, are they sustainable economically? Not all rebuilding is necessarily good. For example, does the community require more public improvements or services than are reasonably generated by the tax base that was created? Or is there an economic balance?

Community

Connection among people supports the culture of family, groups, towns, cities, and nations and is the foundation on which they prosper. Design should organize community to nurture relationships and mutual acceptance. Community sustainability should be measured by its ability to provide safety, health, pleasure, recognition, belonging, esteem, and opportunity for self-actualization within its boundaries. New urbanism has sought to address issues of community primarily through the process of form-giving, but community refers to the physical aspects of a

place as well as the social institutions it inspires and nurtures. And whose responsibility is it to cultivate and facilitate those institutions? Landscape architects.

Design should nurture relationships.

There is a great opportunity to drive deeper into this realm by exploring the designer's role in the development of community institutions, not just the physical spaces that house these institutions. Designers have the task of looking at recreation, libraries, retail, the availability of public gathering spaces, cultural centers, and landmark sites. They need to address both quantity and quality of open spaces. They must mold the fabric of the communities, balancing the number of public versus private organizations. They need to ensure safety, reduce the homelessness rate, and create a healthful environment with places to walk or bike. They must look at mortality rates, building density, availability of public transit, commute times, taxes, educational achievement,

child care costs and availability, and travel time to emergency health care facilities as well as hundreds of other issues that face communities today. And they must provide answers that augment all socioeconomic segments within the community. When designers engage in addressing these issues, they are instruments of change in society. Indeed, the major accomplishment of change is not what ends up on the ground as development, but what changes inside people and forges new bonds among them.

Art

Beauty is a timeless quality. It helps create real destinations that bring us meaning and act as a restorative on the human spirit. It boosts economic value, supports viability, and attracts capital, helping to ensure a project's longevity. Designers are naturally focused on the aesthetic quality of their work. The Legacy Design approach strives to bring a development process to bear, providing iconic quality with a cultural connec-

tion. Places must have intellectual and emotional content, compositional excellence, and physical longevity. They must be innovative and original. The goal of such places is to lift the spirit of the community as well as the art is not only about what you do, but how you do it. There is the artful design of a community as well as the art in the community. There is the artistic expression of the designers and artists who create the community and the art of the people who inhabit it. Art, architecture, landscape, music, theatre, and storytelling give vibrancy and veracity to the character of the community.

When the four elements — environment, economics, community, and art — are in balance, the ideal profile for any project will be formed. With this broader consciousness comes a broader accountability and the need to create a process by which projects can be measured in all areas to ensure that each project continuously moves closer to the ideal. To take this philosophy to reality, there needs to be a way to measure and by measuring become accountable for the work.

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) is the nationally accepted benchmark for the design, construction, and operation of high-performance green buildings. LEED measures performance in five key areas of human and environmental health: sustainable site development, water savings, energy efficiency, materials selections, and indoor environmental quality. By providing the building industry with consistent, credible standards for what constitutes a green building, LEED has provided a system of measurement that has been adopted nationwide. LEED is currently developing a Neighborhood Development Rating System integrating the principles of smart growth, urbanism, and green building into the first national standard for neighborhood design. There is no social measurement implicitly contained within LEED, nor is there an economic or art measurement. But other organizations are filling that void.

The National Neighborhood Indicator Partnership is experimenting with a metrics system that would make

communities accountable in 14 different areas: government, business and economic development, education, environment, citizen participation, housing, human relations, neighborhood condition, neighborhood interactions, public spaces, planning, public safety, transportation, youth, and seniors. The Social Economic Environmental Design Network has engaged in a mission to advance the right of every person to live in a socially, economically, and environmentally healthy community.

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Along these lines, the Global Reporting Initiative introduced the triple bottom line, auditing the impact of economic, social, and environmental factors as well as issues of globalization and the impact of multi-national companies in terms of their responsibilities to the communities in which they work. The quadruple bottom line adds ethical

responsibility and a focus on employees, on stewardship, and on leadership. How to merge ecology, economics, community, and art with the needs of all societies in an ethical manner is clearly no small task. But it must begin by people asking the tough questions. And designers are the right people to do the asking.

Designers have an obligation to ensure sustainability.

Who is responsible for the creation of institutions, programs, and parks? Is it the government? Is it the developer? Is it the community itself? What good is it to plan for a park when there's no money to build it, to maintain it, to sustain it? We would be creating a trash-filled field, the perfect location for a drug deal or a homeless camp.

How can designers think of creating communities in this country or Third-World countries that fail to nurture the spirit, that are not sustainable on every level?

As the leaders in the process, designers have an obligation to ensure that what is created is indeed sustainable on every level. As a child once asked, "If people can't read, live together in peace, have meaningful jobs, feel safe and uplifted, have we really sustained the planet?"

It is designers' responsibility, even mandate, to take action, not direction. They need to figure out in every project what measures must be taken in order to do it right: to move clients' hearts, minds, and purses to the bigger picture and give them the opportunity to create legacies. Designers succeeded in bringing green to the forefront, now they need to advocate for the rest of the spectrum.



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