



Why Green Design Matters

By PENNY BONDA, FASID

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There couldn't be an easier question to answer than why "green" design matters nor one more complex. Simply put, it matters because we have one Earth on which to live, and if we destroy its ability to support life, we haven't a spare planet lying around with which to replace it.

The U.S. comprises less than 6 percent of the world's population, yet we consume 25 percent of its energy and own 32 percent of its automobiles.

The issues behind this obvious assertion are quite complicated, however, and often controversial. How we act as individuals collectively determines the global condition and, while one person's destructive act (for example, throwing toxic chemicals into a local stream) matters little, if everyone were to do it—well, you get the picture. For this reason, all of Earth's citizens must develop a broad perspective and become stewards of our planet before it's too late. The evidence is mounting, for example, that we are headed toward the dire consequences of global warming and we would be foolish to wait for a calamity, such as disappearing coastlines, to take action.

We here in the U.S. have special responsibilities. If everyone in the world were to have access to the standard of living we enjoy in this country, we would need four Earths to support us. The U.S. comprises less than 6 percent of the world's population, yet we consume 25 percent of its energy and own 32 percent of its automobiles. Our ecological footprint, in other words, is enormous compared to that of people living in India, Mexico and even most European countries.

There are tragic and costly consequences to our current priorities, one of the largest of which is our dependence on foreign oil. Actions such as conservation, increased energy efficiency and the development of alternative energy sources, can reduce this dependence. For example, raising fuel efficiency standards of automobiles to 40 miles per gallon with existing technologies would save the U.S. about 2.5 million barrels of oil a day by 2020. That's the same amount we import each day from the Persian Gulf.

Waste and resource management is another of our immense problems. In the U.S., 32 truckloads of waste are created for every truckload of goods produced and 90 percent of everything made in this country ends up in a landfill within one year. The rate at which open space is being lost to development has more than doubled since 1992. Nationwide, almost four billion pounds of carpet are landfilled every year. We are a culture that likes to throw things away, but whether our trash goes to a landfill or is incinerated, the concept of "away" is an illusion. Moving our waste from one place to another or burning it simply transfers the problem to another locale or, even worse, another time.

Remote Intergenerational Tyranny

Architect William McDonough borrowed the phrase "remote intergenerational tyranny" from Thomas Jefferson. Just as we look back on our forefathers in horror for owning slaves, so will future generations vilify us for depriving them of the same quality of life that we enjoy. Chief Oren Lyons, an eloquent Native American leader, said, "I do not believe that the process of human life on this globe has degenerated to a point of no return. I do believe, however, that we are fast approaching that point and we must redirect and correct our course in life to ensure health and a good life for the seventh generation coming... This legacy is passed down not to ensure the present, but to guarantee the future. Thinking of future generations is an enormous responsibility that requires vision."

The Designer's Special Role

The interior designer and the architect play a special role in defining Chief Lyons' vision because, with the power to create, the designer has responsibilities beyond others. We are obligated to practice sustainable design, in other words, to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. We must recognize that the things we do and the choices we make have long-term effects, from choosing woods that are not in danger of extinction to assuring that the materials we specify don't contribute to exacerbating a sick child's asthma.

The Impact of the Built Environment

The U.S. Green Building Council states that the built environment is growing globally at a rate that is three times faster than the growth rate of the population and that buildings have a huge impact, consuming between 30 to 40 percent of all energy used, adding 30 to 40 percent of atmospheric emissions and using up to 30 percent of all raw materials. Further, it estimates that one third of all buildings have serious indoor air quality problems (see related article, p. 14) making them unhealthy environments for occupants and expensive for business. Poor indoor air quality in the U.S. has resulted in an annual loss of \$15 billion in worker productivity. Even small improvements in indoor environmental quality can mean regaining millions in lost revenue.

Other articles in this issue of *ASID ICON* will define green design and provide examples of successful green projects with specific strategies for practitioners to emulate. Many of these strategies are easy, and others will require specialized knowledge and experience. But before any of these tactics—recycling, daylighting techniques, decreased use of toxic materials and better indoor air quality—must come the very personal decision to take moral responsibility for what we do as designers of the built environment.

In his book, *Ishmael*, author Daniel Quinn challenges the reader to consider the consequences if humanity continues down its current path as a civilization driven to destroy the world in order to live. Like Chief Lyons, he calls for a new vision. “It’s like a man severely injured in a terrible automobile accident,” Quinn says as analogy. “He’s taken away in an ambulance and the medics do everything possible to keep him alive. But if there isn’t a hospital at the end of the road, he’s going to die. A lot of people today are doing things that are admirable and that must be done, but those are band-aids and won’t save us. Without a new vision, we’re not going to survive. That vision is to us what the hospital is to the accident victim.”

Designers, says Quinn, have much to teach the world in this respect. Of all people, designers understand there is never one right way to design anything. Searching for new solutions, creatively adapting what we know into what we need and solving problems are what designers do. Perhaps, then, we as designers need to expand our vision to include sustainability and start showing ordinary people how to look at the world from a green design point of view. ○



Penny Bonda, FASID

After a noted 27-year career in interior design, **Penny Bonda, FASID**, is currently the director of environmental communications for EnvironDesignWorks. She also chairs the U.S. Green Building Council Committee for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED™) Commercial Interiors and is a LEED Accredited Professional. A past president of ASID, she now focuses exclusively on communicating the urgency of the issues and educating design professionals on how they can incorporate sustainability into their practices.

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