

print

design for curious minds

The Ups and Downs of Going Green

by Jeremy Lehrer

One early morning this past spring, I joined an AIGA breakfast club focused on green design called “Going Green for Real.” I hoped the event, held in a cozy nook of a café in Manhattan’s East Village, would provide perfect fodder for my next column. I wasn’t disappointed.

The presenter was Naomi Pearson, a designer and sustainability consultant who has worked for Two Twelve Associates and who hosts the online radio show [Design Evolution](#), a program about sustainable design. Pearson spoke about her research into green printing and topics like lifecycle analysis, the process by which designers gauge the environmental impact of a design project from beginning to end. The questions involved might include, How much energy will be used to make this? Can it be recycled, or even upcycled—changed from something disposable to something of greater value—or will it be chucked into a landfill?

The designers gathered at the talk were an eclectic bunch, and some seemed better versed than others in green design. I realized that they could act as an informal sustainable-design focus group. So I interviewed four of the attendees—Tina Chang, Joe Shouldice, Anke Stohlmann, and Richard Salcer—to find out: Why is green design so important, and what challenges are involved? Their responses reveal how designers can be alternately inspired, intimidated, confused, and occasionally triumphant in the quest to figure out what green design means as a real-world practice.



Tina Chang
Partner, [Little Fury](#) and [Start Here](#)

Why is green design important to you?

My studio, Little Fury, and my product line, Start Here. Little Fury is my design studio, and we do a lot of packaging. Being in the packaging world, it’s hard to ignore that overpackaging and in general the amount of materials that go into packaging. One of the clients we worked with initially was Johnson & Johnson, for the Rembrandt project. Chris Hacker is a huge environmental advocate. One of the challenges he gave us with Rembrandt was to be responsible about the packaging, and so that was something that was



Start Here line of notebooks, by Little Fury.

Designers Interviewed

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planted in our minds when we were doing the project.

I read *Cradle to Cradle* [the book by Michael Braungart and William McDonough], and I think that once your eyes get opened to this issue, it's hard to pretend you don't see it, especially when as designers we do have such control over the materials that are being used and how the products are packaged. Since then, we've been trying to push our clients. We've also been lucky that our clients also have been equally concerned about it, so it's been a nice marriage. It's so much on everyone's radar, and I think the bigger issue is always really not just scratching that surface, but really doing it. It's easy to say that we're going to use recycled paper and then say, okay, that's our green part of it. But that's such a minor part of that whole process: It really has to be implemented from the beginning to the end.

How would you define green design?

Design is really about function and form and use, and that's all where green can come into it now. If you really want to be green designer, it's really being aware about how to be green on every level, and raising your standards to what that means and not just being able to slap a "recycled" logo or give your client a green tagline. It's not marketing green, it's not the perception of green. It involves examining the process from the beginning to the end. Green design is creating a beautiful design that also doesn't require so much waste, and using that as a starting point.

However, it also involves partnering up with people that also understand this and have a similar philosophy. How are [your potential partners] running their plant? Are they pushing to be a greener facility, are they concerned about more than just the basic minimum necessary to be called a green company, or do they really have the passion for it? The business that you give them is worth the effort. This is in contrast with a situation that I see a lot of now, where a lot of companies want to be green, or say that they're green—but they're not really challenging themselves. Doing this type of design involves aligning with the right people, and if you align yourself with the right people, they end up teaching you so much.

The printing field is a whole other industry that's changing all the time, too, and it's daunting as a designer to constantly be up to date on that. But if you're working with people who already have that concern and it's their industry—if we're concerned about our part of it in our industry and then you work with a printer who's concerned about it in their industry, it's the perfect marriage.

And if you get the printers involved early on, too, I also think that that's a really great way of increasing your green factor. Because they can really tell you, "Oh, if you could make this brochure 16 pages, that would be better because it's gaining up on this one sheet." You know, you're creating less waste. There are so many technical things that they have expertise on, that instead of using them towards the end of a process, if you use them towards the beginning of the process, I find that they can be tremendously helpful in really honing your design to its ideal form.

What else do you find daunting in terms of learning about or doing green design?

It's still harder to convince clients because there is still a financial cost to it. It's a challenge to sell it to people who maybe don't have that as their main concern, and then convince them to make it their concern. There are definitely companies—especially now—who are looking for green things, and it's important to show that you can add value on a design level, because at the end of the day, they want the best design. So as a designer, if you can provide that design with green methods, then hopefully they won't see it as a sacrifice as much as a benefit.

The second biggest challenge involves more of following through with the green ethos on every level, because you have to be pretty diligent about it, and it's something that you can lose sight of. A lot of people—I'm guilty of this, too—stop at a certain point, because you do have to put a tremendous amount of extra effort to be constantly vigilant about it in terms of who you're working with, how the project is being processed, how it's being packed. Every step of the way you really could be green, but it requires that extra amount of diligence not only on a designer's part but on the part of everyone else who's working on the project. And sometimes you start a project really gung ho about it, but that energy can fade somewhat six months into it, with deadlines and budgets, you know. So the challenge is keeping that green mindset in the forefront.

What obstacles do you see in the design industry in regards to green design?

Green is a huge buzzword now. The term is starting to catch on, but I think the real challenge is about trying to take it seriously, instead of having it be just a catchphrase. It's an easy label to put on everything, and the danger is allowing others—and yourself—to get away with the idea that you're doing your part, when you're not really pushing it.

Was there anything in Pearson's presentation that stood out for you?

Her talk really emphasized this idea of digging deeper and not just being okay with the norm—and the fact that there is information available out there. One of the things that we try to do is collect resources of people who are "green connections." Naomi said she kept a binder with this kind of information, and she tries to keep that mode of organizing information, in terms of keeping a list of

resources, inherent to her work approach. I think that that has been a really good thing for me—keeping a database of contacts and resources—so each question or project is not always a new thing that you're attacking every time, but it's part of your studio approach.



Are there any things that have been particularly helpful in terms of becoming more versed in green design? I would love to say, "Oh yeah, I subscribe to green magazines, and read green blogs," but I really don't. So for me, it's something I focus on as a project comes in. Because I have to focus on context and reality. I can read about a bunch of things, but if it doesn't really apply to my current work, then it will just go in one ear and out the other. I think the learning happens when it's real and as things are actually on your plate, or as you're dealing with a client and you have to go through that checklist and try to work the sustainable dimension where it can be worked in. For me, it's about reality—what's the project I have in front of me, and how can I make it more green?

How has your perspective on green design changed over time?

I think the biggest lesson in being green is really about the details, and how it does have to be a very conscious, constant priority, or it can very much slip into the backdrop.

Anke Stohlmann

Creative Director, Anke Stohlmann Design

What is green design?

It's lots of things, but it goes beyond just spec'ing recycled paper and looking for soy inks or a special printer. It goes into what designers do already, like creating smart design, where you think about different aspects of the project. Where you look at: How can you reuse something, or make a certain piece multifunctional, and really looking at what is the appropriate medium for a client. You start there, and once you figure that out, you look closely at how you can create multipurpose projects that have different functions for a design later on. You have to ask, "How can it be reused?" For example, FedEx came up with the reusable envelope—those kinds of things. I feel that designers do that already, so it's just a matter of incorporating that a little bit more into the thinking and in the process. Because people do create smart design, and that to me is truly sustainable.

Have you been able to do that with certain projects?

In *Green Graphic Design*, Brian Dougherty talks about looking closely at your press sheet, and figuring out how to use it efficiently. When you do magazine design or book design, you think about that already. You have as many pages as you can have, and so it's like you have to add four or have four less to use the press sheet efficiently. When you create a folder or a postcard, you don't think about it that way.

Green design is a little bit more in the planning stage. Where you look at the project, and consider, what is the printer printing on, how can I maximize that, and if I want to maximize it, how does it affect my design?

What do you find most daunting?

How it clashes with reality—or budgets. Ideally, you want always just do green design but then on the other hand, if you can't find a solution in your budget, what do you do? If your client has a very small budget, what do you do? What can you do beyond using recycled paper? Recycled paper is just one step. But if there isn't a huge budget, or your client doesn't have an interest, how can you weave it into the design?

What stood out for you most in the morning presentation?

What really resonated with me was the way Naomi said that's it's a step-by-step "conversation by conversation." You can't achieve it all in one go. It has to become a way of life, and it will only gradually become a way of life. So that as you integrate more and more of those questions, and more and more of those things into the way you approach a project, in 10 years from now, that will just be the way you think—there won't be an alternative. The more you learn and the more you deal with or confront it, the easier it gets to integrate green design into your life, and those decisions then become second nature. It's okay to recognize that not all of our projects are 100 percent sustainable or green at the moment. But if you start thinking about it, and know that this is where you want to go, then the more and more you'll get closer to that.

What do you think would help you and other design colleagues make the transition?

I think a lot of it is having the resources handy. On the one hand, yes, you should do the research, but how often is it crunch time and you don't really have the time to research it? What you do know, is that, okay, I want to have a recycled paper. Or you have a list of printers that you know you can rely on. But having these resources, so that your decision can be from among ten good printers, or ten different recycled papers, and seeing what fits best for the needs of your project or what you want to achieve with your project.

What is one thing that you couldn't give up, even if it wasn't green?

One thing is printing in general. Having something in your hand—a book—those kind of things are all printed. How many trees went into this book? Even though I'm the designer of a book, I'm also the consumer, I want to have it in my hand. I want the magazine in my hand. I wouldn't be ready to just read stuff only online.

Is there any green design project that particularly impressed you?

Green Graphic Design mention this lightbulb packaging where the packaging itself turns into a lamp shade. This comes back to the kind of thinking where smart design allows you to create something you can reuse.

Another example is something that a printer told me. He told me that for in-store posters for a particular campaign, the printer printed on magnetic paper—and because of this, they were able to roll it and ship the paper in rolls. And they saved millions of dollars in shipping and also packaging materials. That to me was an interesting solution that just by thinking about what do you print on, that you were able to reduce your shipping expenses—not only packaging costs. So you were really saving money and also the shipping material. And that is sustainable to me.

But why was it printed on magnetic paper?

Because then you can roll it, and when you unroll it, you can put it up on the wall. It's flat again. You don't have to have it flat in cartons. They were able to roll it. So who knows how good the magnetic paper was. But on the other hand, it saved a lot of money and a lot of packaging.

Joe Shouldice

Sagmeister Inc.

What is green design for you?

I think that in its truest sense it would be almost like your stereotypical green design piece using totally environmentally friendly paper, the vegetable-based inks, the kind of the thing that really creates zero impact. Or printing on leaves or whatever, something like that. But that's in its truest sense and in its essentially unattainable sense. In reality, I would say that with green design, it's almost like the intention is as important, so even if you're able to make some elements of the project less harmful, then I think you can make an argument that that's green design.

What do you find the most daunting about that kind of design?

As a print designer, you like printed things, you like the feel of paper, you like different special techniques used on the paper. By their very nature, you could argue that a lot of these are completely superfluous and that it's hard then to balance the assignment to create something with the question of, "Is there a need to do this?" I think you could say that if you're truly a green designer, there's probably few things that you would ever want to print or would need to print. But I think that's such an extreme perspective that it goes against the essence of the profession.

And if your mindset is in that position of not wanting to make anything, then it's easy just to throw hands up and not do anything. But it is important to at least be realistic about the fact that, nowadays, a lot of the work we do is going to have some kind of harmful effect. But there are a lot—and increasingly more—ways to do small parts of your project that will make it greener: In that sense, maybe a quarter of your project has some green dimension to it, or maybe you create your case out of recycled materials, or you find a different production method. I think that at least trying to hang on to those and grow those, is a more realistic way of looking at things instead of going for the 100 percent option. It's probably pretty hard for a lot of people to go whole hog into it.

What would make it easier for you to learn this stuff and to figure out what the greener options are?

This is the lazy answer but it's the most honest. If that learning went on with the suppliers and the printers, and all these people we work with, and when we spec'ed the job, they were able to easily explain what would be the better option: "Hey, you know, you can actually do the project this way, or you can use this different ink or you can use this different paper." Or, "This will be the difference in price, but this is the reason it's a lot better." I think that would be fantastic.

You mentioned a project you're working on where you had gotten an estimate for using a paper with higher percentage of recycled content that would have cost the client a lot more money—anywhere from 25 percent higher to 75 percent higher, depending on the specific paper you chose—can you tell me more about that?

This I think is where the painful part comes in, because even though ideally I'd love to use that recycled paper, as it is, this quote is way higher than the client was expecting. I'm working extremely hard with other design and production details to try to bring this quote down. And I'm trying to figure out how I can tweak the design so that one less ink is used, or so we don't need this one specific ink, or we don't need to do this technique, or this thing doesn't have to happen. So I'm doing tons of work just on that to bring the price down, so that I can present this quote to the client, which is already going to be too high. I'm going to have a tough time selling even that to them. So for this specific case here, the option of adding another 25 percent on top is—well, I couldn't even consider it at this point. If I wanted to do that, I would have to do a major redesign on some elements of the project.

What's the one thing that you couldn't give up even if it wasn't green?

Posters. There's all those special treatments and techniques and printing methods, but there's no specific one that makes me think, "Oh, I could never design again if I'm not allowed to do foil-stamping..." But if there's an opportunity to do a poster—even if I know it's kind of a superfluous poster that doesn't need to be printed—I think that the opportunity to do a poster would probably win out.

Richard Salcer

Creative director, Richard Salcer Design

What is green design to you?

Well, green design to me is nothing new, let's put it that way. This is a subject that seems to come to the fore every decade or so. And in the past, people make noise about and then it disappears, but I have a feeling that now it's different. Green design—what it is to me now—is something that's here to stay. A lot of the talking has to cease and the action has to start.

People used to think that recycled paper was a cheap-looking matte paper and maybe there are still chunks of wood floating in it. But of course there are many papers out there that look highly finished, they're very bright white and almost blue white, and even have a gloss finish to them, but they're manufactured in an environmentally responsible way.

Why is green design important to you?

The current situation reminds me of the Internet. Years ago, IBM ran a series of very witty ads on TV, where one ad shows an older man talking to a younger man, and the older man says, "We need a website!" And the younger man says, "Why?" And the older man says, "I don't know—we're supposed to have one, everybody has one."

If you translate that over to why there's an imperative to be green now, some people think, "Well, it's expected of us." Other people look beyond that. I think it's incumbent on designers to be knowledgeable about sustainable ways of doing things. And also to take the sting out of the word "sustainable." I think people hear that and their eyes glaze over, "Oh yeah, sustainable—what are we sustaining?" I think a lot of people still have that feeling, and nobody wants to acknowledge they don't know it yet.

I recently attended a show in New York City called Luxe Pack, which was dedicated to the luxury goods packaging industry. A lot of manufacturers were there. And I saw a great number of people offering green and sustainable ways to maintain the look of luxury packaging without sacrificing the feel of luxury. That was something I didn't notice in the past.

That arena has always been considered problematic—how do you use materials to still produce what looked like luxury, high-end packaging without using wasteful materials or creating packaging that may look fancy but then you throw it away? What's interesting in the luxury packaging business—I'm primarily a package designer—is that one way of being green is to make it so damn beautiful, you don't want to throw it away. And that pertains quite a bit to fragrances.

What do you find to be the most daunting obstacle preventing you from doing green design?

Knowledge of resources. Knowing how I can do it the green way instead of the other way. But there are ways of learning. For example, there's a great firm right here in New York City called Design and Source Productions. They not only design things that are sustainable, but they also act as a conduit to people who need something that's made out of sustainable materials. And they search the world wide. They've done some really good work in that area.

In terms of other obstacles, a lot of the products that are made for luxury packaging—either for the liquor industry or for the fragrance industry—are made in such a way that it's very difficult to find an environmentally green alternative. And the look of the packaging is so important to selling the image, because you're selling a fantasy, basically, which is what cosmetics and fragrances are. I think designers in that area are finding it hard to wean themselves away from that. Although some are doing it.

In terms of clients who you have contact with, do you sense they're open to green design solutions now?

Yes, I think they are, because they hear so much about it. That's when they come to the designer: "What do we do to be green?" Some of them already know—I don't have to tell them.

How has your perspective changed over time?

In a way, it's an offshoot of what I do as a designer in package design, in that packaging used to be considered an afterthought, until people realized: "That's the silent salesman," that's the first thing people see. Sometimes the only advertising a product gets is its packaging. Just like people no longer think of that as an afterthought or as window dressing, I don't think people can think of the green approach to design as window dressing anymore, either.

What do you feel would help designers make the transition to being more green?

A person has to stay curious about this sort of thing. Nobody's going to hand this to you, saying, "Okay, here it is, the turnkey operation whereby you can be a green designer." You have to want to know what you can do about it. You have to attend seminars, you have to read books, you have to stay curious, so that when people ask the questions, the answers come to mind readily for you. They don't come to mind readily for me yet, but I'm closer than where I was.