THE RAPID EXPANSION OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN GRAPHIC DESIGN IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A DECADE OF CHANGE FROM THE GROUND UP

ADRIENNE SCHWARTE
MARYVILLE COLLEGE
ADRIENNE.SCHWARTE@MARYVILLECOLLEGE.EDU

ABSTRACT
This paper will examine the evolution and primary catalysts of social activism in environmental sustainability in graphic design in the United States from the mid-to-late 1990s to the present day. In the mid-to-late 1990s the principles of sustainability were incorporated into very few graphic works and in even fewer design processes. Although a select few firms such as Celery Design Collaborative (founded in 1997 in San Francisco) and Aveda, were beginning to consider graphic design focused towards post-consumer recycled (PCR) materials, reusable packaging and 100% renewable energy printing, most social activism in graphic design during this period was focused towards issues of gender equality, race or AIDS. However, in less than a decade, the field of social activism towards environmental sustainability in graphic design in the US exploded. By 2007 (ten years after the founding of Celery), the Center for Sustainable Design as a part of the American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA) was established and organizations such as Design Can Change, Design 21, the Designer’s Accord, and Re-nourish were engaging designers in sustainable practices, among so many others. The blossoming of these grass roots organizations transformed the visual design from traditionally printing 70+ page reports (which happened to be focused on social and environmental responsibility for corporate organizations), to online, downloadable or locally-printed versions of reports that were made of recycled materials, used less resources and involved a design process of “designing backwards” (Dougherty 2008). These shifts
spawned the biggest social activist resource in environmental sustainability in the US to date, the Living Principles, Creative Action For Collective Good website in 2010 which reaches over 22,000 AIGA members in the US and has become a clearinghouse for community-based social change through design, making sustainable practices prerequisites for successful design in the US today.

Reference

INTRODUCTION
Sustainability is not a novel, or even recent, guest to the table in the field of design. In fact, the ideas behind environmental sustainability have been around since humans began documenting their presence. For example, some of the earliest records of sustainable design in architecture dates back to 700 A.D., where the Anasazi Indians developed housing that would be considered ‘green.’ (DeVries 2010). ‘Green’ architecture continued to dot US history with the advent of the Native American wigwams, the Inuit igloos, Frank Lloyd Wright’s nature-driven prairie homes and more recently net-zero office buildings and the highly anticipated, ‘Living Building’ structures and systems currently in development. (International Living Future Institute 2010).

Unlike architecture, however, graphic design has only recently, within the last fifteen years, begun making its mark in environmental sustainability. However, it’s rapid expansion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have been so transformational, it can be classified as a primary player in social activism, and one of the most significant changes to the field of graphic design since Johann Gutenberg gave the world moveable type in 1450 (Meggs 2006).

The definition of environmental sustainability that is widely accepted today, developed by the World Commission on the Environment and Development (known also as the Brundtland Commission), is “...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition was only developed in the 1980s and, although aspects of environmental sustainability have been incorporated in design far before this, it was not until a global, collective definition was established and adopted that one could formally identify what is and is not “sustainability.” (Our Common Future 1987).

Shortly after the Brundtland’s Commission’s definition was established, a few corporations most directly related to design via product development shifted their focus towards this definition and began the initial process of establishing standards for their business and design practices and processes. One such company, Aveda, is one of the leading manufacturers of flower and plant-based beauty products (Aveda 2011). Although started a decade earlier in 1989, Aveda was the first company to “endorse and sign the CERES principles (Coalition for Environmentally
Responsible Economies, Aveda 2011). However, when Aveda was signing the CERES principles, a definition for “sustainable design,” had yet to be established and most, if not all, of social activism in the field of graphic design, was directed towards AIDS, gender equality, race, education or war.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM & GRAPHIC DESIGN BEFORE THE 1990S
In order to further understand how social activism in environmental sustainability in the field of graphic design exploded in the United States between the mid-to-late 1990s to today, it is crucial to define social activism, it’s connection to sustainability, and how the field of design, particularly graphic design has been associated with social activism or ‘design-led activism’ for over a century. According to Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib in his article, “(de)Meaning of Social Activism” (2006), social activism is characterized as “an ideal or a cause that translates beyond mere offering of one’s services. Activism, in other words, involves advocacy.” And further, activism is not volunteerism, but the process of taking private problems and rendering them into larger social issues (Taib 2006). In addition to this perspective of activism, Alastair Fuad-Luke in Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World (2009), expands on identifying activism as being a part of either “social, environmental or political movements that are localized or distributed, and that are based upon collective and/or individual actions.” And, although environmental sustainability has been consistently described as a biocentric focus, it is important to note that sustainability exists if economic, environmental and social/cultural sectors are all aligned and interconnected, and therefore, is not only biocentric, but also anthropocentric as well.

And, the field of graphic design has not been a stranger to social activism, as defined above. Even Fuad-Luke (2009) identifies that graphic designers have been ‘voices’ of change since as early as the suffragette movement in the 1860s and their design-led activism, which involves graphic designers foraging discussions about social problems on their own, beyond the client-directed simplistic print or online media response, attests that graphic designers have a “central role to play in activism’s wider purpose.” And, even though Walt Kelly, Robert Rauschenberg and The Washingtonian magazine created posters for the first Earth Day in 1970, (Sams, 2010 Figure 1, 2 and 3), those central roles in design-led activism via graphic design outlets were focused most directly on issues such as AIDS, equality, race, war, democracy and poverty, which clearly have direct links to sustainability as a system’s theory approach, but were not connected as such during
For example, if you use the American Institute of Graphic Arts’ (AIGA) Medal Award, which has been awarded since 1920, as a touchtone for exemplars of graphic design-led activism (the award, according to the AIGA website, is given to: “individuals who have set standards of excellence over a lifetime of work or have made individual contributions to innovation within the practice of design,”) you will find such names as Ben Shahn (1958), Seymour Chwast (1985), Georg Olden (1988), E. McKnight Kauffer (1991), Katherine McCoy (1999), Paula Scher (2001), and Chris Pullman (2002), among others, who have made significant contributions to the artefactual history of graphic design on social issues. These issues include:
Anti-war, Democracy and Political Unrest:

Kauffer’s, “Allied Unity” (Figure 4), Chwast’s “War is Madness” (Figure 5) and “End Bad Breath” (Figure 6), Pullman’s “Vote” posters for the AIGA Boston chapter (1980s-1990s, Figure 7) and his “Vietnam: A Television History Poster” (Figure 8), Shaun’s posters for the U.S. Office of War Information (Figure 9), Scher’s: “The Maps” series (Figure 10),
Figure 7: Chris Pullman, “Vote” 1980s-1990s, reprinted for the AIGA Design Archives Online

Figure 8: Chris Pullman, “Vietnam: A Television History Poster” 1983, reprinted from the AIGA Design Archives Online

Figure 9: Ben Shaun, US Office of War Information, 1943, reprinted from the National Archives Online

Figure 10: Paula Scher, “The Map Series” 2005, reprinted from MetropolisMag.Com Online
Gender, Equality, Race:
Olden’s work on the postage stamp to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, CBS Brotherhood Week programming (Figure 13 and 14), and his influence to other black American graphic designers, and Scher’s “Language is a Deadly Weapon, (Figure 15), about gender equality.

-Public Education & Social Justice:
McCoy’s work on the “Colorado Native American Heritage Poster Project” (Figure 11) and “Design Michigan” (Figure 12),
Looking to the AIGA Medalists as exemplars it’s relatively apparent that not only were designers engaged in social activism and it is recognized as a gage of excellence within design, but also that during the mid-to late twentieth century it was heavily focused on ‘human-centered’ activism and influenced by political and social unrest. However, during the early to mid-1990s, a resurgence of interest in the environmental movement from the 1970s begins, but now as a design problem, not simply from the environmental studies and ecological framework (Fuad-Luke 2009). Even Fuad-Luke asserts that “it was not until the early 1990s that the discourse on the environmental impacts of design came of age and only in the past five years or so that attention refocused on design in the social arena (2009).”

Figure 16: Graphic Design an Environmental Sustainability, 1990-1998; Note: some environmental events are referenced from the Environmental History Timeline, 2011.
As this shift in the field of design begins, it starts by attaching itself to architecture, interior design and product design and then meanders over to the field of graphic design. In this timeframe (1990-1998), the shift has not occurred, but merely a collection of research or data from other disciplinary areas that foray to the field of graphic design, mostly through architecture, product, industrial design or ecology is commenced. Therefore, these key publications, organizations, and events listed in the timeline are either created, developed or occur to act as catalysts for the rapid expansion of social activism focused around environmental sustainability in graphic design for the decade ahead (Figure 16). After all, a movement has to start somewhere...

Although at this point it is difficult to decipher how many graphic designers or graphic design firms were actually engaging in what would become coined as ‘sustainable design practices’ (especially since most firms or studios did not even have a web presence until the mid to late 1990s), it is apparent the numbers were insignificant as a simple survey of over 200 article titles between 1990-1998 from *Design Issues*, the first “American academic journal to examine design history, theory, and criticism...[and] provokes inquiry into the cultural and intellectual issues surrounding design,” from the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT) Press, reveals only about 3% of article titles had either “ecology, environment, sustainable and/or green.” in their title (Design Issues 1990-1998).

Further, one-third of the articles that included these particular ‘eco-buzzwords’ were geared towards product and industrial design and not particularly graphic design. However, in Pauline Madge’s article (1997), “Ecological Design: A New Critique,” a definition of sustainable design is presented, which includes “analyzing and changing the ’systems’ in which we make, use, and dispose of products.” Although narrower in scope, this provides a working definition of sustainable design. She further expands that sustainability itself is ‘system-based’ and expands to include social responsibility, and even ethics. This definition yields much closer to what becomes the primary perspective and more inclusive definition for sustainability in the mid-stages of graphic design and the environmental movement.

**CUTTING TEETH: THE MID-STAGES OF GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY 1999-2005**
The period between 1999-2005 is a critical segment in which designers’ previously established roles as activists and grassroots trailblazers begins to shift towards contexts of environmental sustainability, setting the stage for the rapid expansion in graphic design organizations and societies focused around this broad issue. This stage is characterized by behaviors most closely aligned with activism: new non-governmental organizations (NGOs) database clearinghouses, citizen awareness campaigns, change campaigns, and the beginning of designer’s abilities to shift their own design practices and processes to sustainable ones, although this does not fully develop until environmental sustainability and graphic design comes of age.

Since some of the most influential evidence involving climate change is published and validated by scholars during this period, as well as some of the most devastating events in US history: September 11, 2001, US launches Iraq war, and Hurricane Katrina, it is clear that such events reignited the “activist” prowess of many graphic designers, and therefore, engaged them in the environmental movement through issues focused around health, equality, poverty and race, all issues being ever more recognized to their connection to the environment and ever more defined by system’s thinking and the sustainability movement (Figure 17).

It has also been observed that during this timeframe designers become ever more aware of
their personal and professional contribution to global climate change, further influencing their desire to make positive social change to uphold the value of their profession and to commit to an already established ethical standard of graphic design (Design Can Change 2009), established by the AIGA Design Business and Ethics publications, a decade earlier, now in its third edition. (AIGA, Design Business and Ethics 2009).

Figure 18: Celery Website, 2011, reprinted from Celery Design Collaborative Online

During this time, there are a few innovators engaged in ‘greening’ their design practices or initiating new firms with sustainability as a central focus. One such example is Celery Design Collaborative (Figure 18). Founded in 1997 by Brian Dougherty and Rod DeWeese, they set a new path for how to re-imagine a design firm with activism as a central goal. Their website even categories their role as, “an advocate for a new model of graphic design that deals proactively with social and environmental challenges. Through frequent lectures, magazine articles and public outreach projects such as the ‘Ecological Guide to Paper,’ Celery has worked to influence other graphic designers to embrace sustainability as a crucial design objective.” It was Dougherty’s book, *Green Graphic Design* (2008), that coined the phrase and philosophy, “NGISED” or “designing backwards,” as a way to see life cycle, waste, use, material, function, distribution and process in order to design in a way that considers end use first and not last, which was moreover the leading philosophy in design at this time.

Although Dougherty’s book is not published until environmental sustainability and graphic design comes of age, Celery Design Collaborative’s philosophy and engaging in this style of design practice was active when the firm started in 1997 (although, it has also evolved over time as well).

To see a simple example of the shift in how their methodologies influenced design collateral and clients over time, the first report Celery designed for Hewlett-Packard (HP) in 2002 was a traditional sixty-eight page printed report (focused on social and environmental responsibility ironically), and five years later the report had become a web-only format with local printing options only and a much more nonlinear format to satisfy individual’s needs for review, organization and analysis. (Dougherty, 2008). This is just one of many examples that showcases a shift in both design process and outcome, based on the lens of environmental sustainability.

It might be useful to note that, even in Dougherty’s introduction to the book, he mentions that his start to “green design” came from an architect (Sim Van der Ryn), further
exemplifying that graphic design forayed into the sustainability discipline through other areas of design (Dougherty 2008).

Aside from practice, the scholarly discourse on sustainability appears to actually decrease slightly during this timeframe, but expansion happens via social media through the development of websites and online clearinghouses, as do words such as postconsumer recycled content and waste (PCW), eco-labeling, FSC-certification, and print on demand (POD) become more commonplace language in graphic design terminology. A survey of Design Issues titles from 1999-2005 finds only slightly fewer than 2% (1.96%) of article titles that contain the aforementioned ‘eco-buzzwords’ of “ecology, environment, sustainable and/or green.” (Design Issues 1999-2005). Part of this could be due to the more grassroots activist approach taken by designers during this period, whereas more focus was geared towards reaching a broader audience of public citizens to educate about global climate change and the role of the consumer, rather than a smaller population of scholars. The primary goal of educating other designers about sustainable practices is what drives the next phase of this movement.

Between the period of 2006-2011 (Figure 19), graphic design as a profession begins the paradigm shift from promoting and educating about environmental sustainability into actually infusing it into practice, process and making it a core value of responsible design. Designers become synonymous with the activist roles they played in World War II and during the first environmental movement of the 1970s (Bierut, Friedman, et al 2009). However, much of the progress on environmental sustainability during this time is facilitated by governance and initiatives from graphic designs organizations that find a critical need to keep pulse with their members, who during the wave of 1999-2005 were educating, speaking and designing about the importance of sustainability as a primal goal in the field and society-at-large. And, in the wake of silence or dedicate efforts potentially non-public at the time, (such as the development of AIGA’s Living Principles online community), many new ‘design-related’ NGOs and project-based organizations develop, but with the audience of the graphic designer, and the public secondary. Some such organizations that launch during this time include Design Can Change, The Designer’s Accord, Re-nourish, and the Design Studio for Social Intervention (ds4si) (Figure 20-23). Additionally, Celery’s Ecological Guide to Paper becomes widely distributed, The Green Patriot Posters are published and linked with Canary projects and Change Agents and Compostmodern is hosted by AIGA, who in 2003 published their first, “Print Design and Environmental Responsibility,” (AIGA 2003).
As these new organizations expand and grow, the process of design shifts as well. As previously mentioned, “NGISED” is gaining adoption as a process of engaging in graphic design, as is the method of ‘slow-design,’ although these principles are still not widely adopted (Fuad-Luke 2009). A sample of how the process, terminology, and eventually some of the epistemology of design changes during this time can be seen in the work of Re-nourish.com.

In its beginnings, Re-nourish was simply a result and extension of Eric Benson’s MFA Design thesis at the University of Texas at Austin about sustainable graphic design and education, but has now become one of the leading online tools to “green your studio,” calculate waste for each design project, learn about the sustainability field, see graphic design specific case studies and is even currently engaged in research with the Society of Graphic Designers Canada to “developing a set of open-source sustainable design metrics that anyone can use to measure the impacts and outcomes of graphic design practices throughout the supply chain” (Benson and Perullo 2011, Figure 24). It is resources like these that have shifted graphic design towards ‘water-cooler,’ discussions of agri-fiber papers, 100% PCW, greener and FSC-certified printers, low-VOC and vegetable-based inks, bioplastics, compostable, etc. No longer are we looking to expand the industry of varnish-based work, but to see about eliminating it altogether and finding, better, more sustainable ways to achieve the same effect.

Although resources like Re-nourish are vital resources in the graphic design and environmental sustainability discussion, a resource that fully-integrates all aspects of sustainability (the triple-bottom-line) into the field of graphic design had yet to be developed. It was through AIGA’s initiatives and work at the Center for Sustainable Design, a segment of AIGA criticized by members initially for not being as expansive and forefront within AIGA, that leads to the largest US resource about sustainability for graphic designers to date. In 2010, the AIGA launched The Living Principles for Design, website which it describes:

“aim[s] to guide purposeful action, celebrating and popularizing the efforts of those who use design thinking to create positive cultural change. Drawing from decades of collective wisdom, theory and results, the Living Principles framework weaves environmental, social, economic, and cultural sustainability into an actionable, integrated approach that can be consistently communicated to designers, business leaders, educators and the public. These principles are
truly living: our collective success is dependent on the active involvement of partners, ambassadors, educators, studios and curious individuals who come together to move the conversation—and the industry—forward. The Living Principles website is the place where we co-create, share and showcase best practices, tools, stories and ideas for enabling sustainable action across all design disciplines. It’s creative action for collective good (Figure 25-26).

Figure 25-26: The Living Principles Website and Framework, 2011

One of the most unique aspects of The Living Principles is its ability to have a global, collaborative, community-based conversation about sustainability as it relates to the field of design. Additionally, the shared resources provide that anyone who is a registered member of the community (of which over 2,000 are active members) can engage in a dialogue about everything from sustainable design education to book reviews about Eastern old-growth forests (The Living Principles 2011). The Living Principles is a resource for design professionals, by design and sustainability professionals. There are extensive graphics about its framework, its development, and its primary principles: environment, people, economy, and culture (Figure 26). Even though the Living Principles was launched by the AIGA, which currently has over 22,000 members, it is used as resources for designers of all backgrounds, including industrial and interior design. In fact, the iSDA (Industrial Design Society of America) is a partner in The Living Principles framework. There are countless numbers of tools available on the site, which include IDEO’s Human Centered Design Toolkit to Sappi’s EQ Tool about paper choices and suppliers and their impact on greenhouse gas emissions (The Living Principles 2011). These shared resources further facilitate knowledge about sustainability through professional practice and provide ‘case study-based’ experience by design firms who have fully integrated sustainability into their processes and also from those who are attempting to do so one-step at a time.
The Living Principles has behind it an impressive list of ambassadors, which includes Dougherty from Celery, William Drenttrel from Winterhouse Institute, Phil Hamlett from Academy of Art University and AIGA’s Compostmodern and Gaby Brink, Founder and Creative Director of Tomorrow Partners, among others (Figure 27). And, to clearly see the paradigm shift and rapid expansion of graphic design and environmental sustainability, Brink is a stellar example. She went from being managing partner and creative director of Templin Brink Design (T.B.D.), in 2007 with clients such as Target, Apple and Dockers to closing the firm in order to pursue her desire to create a more ‘sustainable’ business model and then founding Tomorrow Partners in the following year (Porter 2008). Now, her work is a newly visioned strategy firm that does sustainability audits, brand building, social/environmental responsibility reports and training (Tomorrow Partners 2011), and still has an impressive list of some of the top designers working with it.

It also appears that scholarly discourse on environmental sustainability rapidly expands as it expands in industry as well. From 2006 to the present, if you simply review the Design Issues most downloaded articles, you will find that of the twenty listed, six of the twenty mention the word, ‘sustainable, global, socially-responsible, development or sustainable consumption’ in their titles. Therefore, over 30% of the articles that are part of Design Issues’ “Most-Downloaded Articles” category have sustainability or sustainability-related themes as the primary content of the article (Design Issues, 2011). In fact, the top downloaded article is titled, “Social Innovation and New Industrial Contexts: Can Designers ‘Industrialize’ Socially Responsible Solutions?” by Nicola Morelli, which has been downloaded over 1600 times since it was published in 2007 (Morelli 2007). And, all of the articles mentioned have been written in just the past 5 years.

Additionally, over four and a half percent (4.66%) of articles titles published in Design Issues between 2006-2011 had the eco-buzzwords previously mentioned, over double the percentage from 1999-2005, which was just under 2% (1.96%) And, the Design Philosophy Papers just published an entire issue dedicated to design and sustainability in their second issue of 2011. (Design Philosophy Papers 2011). Hopefully, the discussion is just heating up.

**CONCLUSIONS: JUST AN ECO-TREND? MAKING GRAPHIC DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY STICK**

Graphic design has seen its share of trends as one can see by looking back through past articles published in the Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design series that was retired a few years ago (Bierut et al 2006). So, is graphic design and environmental sustainability just another trend that’s reached its peak and will move into steady decline? I think not. But, moving it away from simply being an eco-trend will take much
sustained effort and here are a few closing remarks about how to make graphic design and environmental sustainability ‘stick.’

One of the most unique perspectives that would aid in making environmental sustainability ‘stick’ is an argument Angharad Thomas makes in “Design, Poverty and Sustainable Development” in Design Issues (2006), about graphic designers as ‘eco-designers’ and change agents that are not the “designer as star,” but the designer as a value-driven citizen of society who sees their experience and expertise as a catalyst for greater good. And can, as Thomas (2006) contends, play a role in alleviating poverty through their work, and their ability to connect with other designers who also feel the same pull-towards social change. The entire profession must be reinvented towards this model if environmental sustainability will ever become more than an art nouveau, graffiti or ornamental-based design trend. I’ve witnessed positive progress in this type of shift as the AIGA presented at their leadership conference in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2010 a request for designers to donate 5% of their time to pro bono projects that give back to the communities they live in. Now, 5% will not alleviate poverty, but it is a step in the right direction, and further shifts the role of designer away from ‘designer as star’ to a ‘guide on the side’ (AIGA Leadership Retreat 2010).

Acting as a ‘guide on the side,” can also make the transition easier for a designer to realize that in this new model, they might not actually be producing all of the solutions as previously done. Nicola Morelli (2007) suggests that in order for design and industry to be successful in meeting social and environmental goals in the future, the relationship between client and designer changes, potentially drastically. Morelli (2007) suggests that, “For these people [clients], designers will no longer be required to produce finite solutions but rather scenarios, platforms, and operative strategies to enable them to co-produce their own solutions.” Although, this concept might feel strange (and designer’s have a strong desire to be in control at all times), it provides for a much more cooperative and solutions-based approach to design, that is, more sustainable for the clients and their communities.

Engaging in the kind of ‘slow-design’ that Fuad-Luke (2009) and Ann Thorpe (2010) discuss is another way that environmental sustainability can move beyond simply an eco-trend. This ‘slow-design’ already has successful working models via sustainable agriculture and food systems. The slow-food movement has gained ground and at farm programs like Intervale Center in Burlington, Vermont (the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Vermont), you can see how thoughtful and ‘slow’ design of their center meets some of the ‘slow-design’ goals of collaborating, sharing, co-operation, active participation and seeing beyond only ‘present-day’ needs (Intervale Center 2011 and Fuad-Luke 2009). Yet, even a successful center like Intervale is in need of pro bono designers to provide quality signage and information graphics so Intervale can continue to
educate others about their important role in sustainable agriculture.

Lastly, although the previous musings connect to philosophical underpinnings, they are more deeply rooted in practical or business-model shifts. This last perspective is more philosophical and behavioral in nature, yet is a core element of success for the environmental movement to stick. Tonkinwise in, “I Heart Sustainability (because necessity no longer has agency)” (2011) argues that sustainability must be framed differently and design has the unique capacity to do this. He states, “the argument would be that sustainability is not a necessity. It is not something we have to do. Instead it is something that I choose to do, something that I have to persuade others to choose to do, to want and work toward.” This reframing of sustainability beyond blame shifting, beyond guilt, beyond even a desire for social change or greater good, but towards a ‘desirable’ future that has sustainability as a desire, is a crucial and innovative perspective. Even Saleem Ali in his book, *Treasures of the Earth: Need, Greed and a Sustainable Future* (2009) asserts that in order to alleviate poverty and move towards sustainable development it is crucial to increase the quality of livelihoods globally and in order to do so, desire for material goods is not inherently a bad attribute. If graphic design or the larger design profession can find a way to frame sustainability as ‘desire’ while still achieving the goals of sustainable development, then it doesn’t matter what we call it, it will stick.

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