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Defining Sustainability for Designers

August 9, 2011 | Todd Barsanti |



Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. —[The Brundtland Report](#), 1987

This is the most widely accepted definition of sustainability. It is attributed to Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and Chairperson of the World Commission on Environment and Development. The Commission was established in 1983 by the Secretary General of the United Nations and it recorded this definition in 1987, in a document titled: *Our Common Future*, also known as *The Brundtland Report*.

This definition was actually attributed to Sustainable Development, which is a bit of a hotly contested term in some pro-environmental circles. Some would question that if something is sustainable, how can it be based in development, which is often misconstrued as only being about economic growth. Already, we're beginning to see how quickly the terminology can get confusing.

According to the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) website published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

Sustainable development is a vision of development that encompasses populations, animal and plant species, ecosystems, natural resources and that integrates concerns such as the fight against poverty, gender equality, human rights, education for all, health, human security, intercultural dialogue, etc. ([UNESCO](#))

In *Design Is the Problem*, Nathan Shedroff writes about the difficulty in defining sustainability:

To many, it is synonymous with green (not that green is any more clear) or eco, meaning the environment. To others, it connotes bleeding-heart nouveau hippies, who seem more concerned with plants and animals than people. Sometimes, it's portrayed as a way to promote old, flawed economics as a way of ensuring "business as usual." Often, it's a threat to a way of life that can only, possibly, mean less of everything. Or it can be interpreted as a rational blend of constraints both large and small and a way to serve human needs on all levels, as well as those of other systems. ([Shedroff & Lovins](#), 2009)

The Brundtland Report's definition leaves much room for interpretation but the concept of sustainability refers to a multi-pronged approach to problem solving (or development, or design) that perhaps necessitates a definition that is purposefully non-specific. By most accounts, sustainability is a perspective that focuses on social, financial, and environmental factors. According to the online [Dictionary of Sustainable Management](#), many organizations use the following criteria to assess sustainable products, services, and other activities:

Social Criteria:

- Socially desirable
- Culturally acceptable

- Psychologically nurturing

Financial Criteria:

- Economically sustainable
- Technologically feasible
- Operationally viable

Environmental Criteria:

- Environmentally robust
- Generationally sensitive
- Capable of continuous learning (The Presidio Graduate School,)

Sustainability refers to human and financial issues as much as environmental ones. The multiple perspectives inherent in sustainability encompass cultural impacts as well as ecological ones, financial constraints as well as physical limits, heritage and legacy as well as perspectives of our collective future.

Charles Hopkins was a teacher of mine at York University, he taught a course called Education for Sustainability and he is one of the co-authors of [UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit](#). He often quotes an unnamed African elder when trying to give probably the most succinct definition of sustainable development: "Enough for all, forever." A simple phrase, this definition eloquently speaks to the complexity of sustainability.

Shedroff writes that the only way to address sustainability effectively is from a systems perspective. While I appreciate his wanting to simplify the terminology, we have to be careful—especially when things are already confusing—not to mix or blend our terminology too readily. 'A systems perspective' could easily be confused with Systems Theory, a specialization of Systems Thinking, popularized by Fritjof Capra, amongst others. In a talk entitled The Systems View of Life, Capra says that; "a sustainable community is designed in such a way, that its ways of life, its technologies and its social institutions honour, support and cooperate with nature's inherent ability to sustain life." (Capra, 2007) So there is obviously a great deal of overlap, and the sentiments are similar, but the knock against Systems Thinking is that if you are always trying to focus on the entire system, then you will never be able to focus on any one thing, and you may never find solutions to anything.

Shedroff qualifies his perspective of systems as: "the sum total of everything affected by an activity." (Shedroff & Lovins, 2009) Which is to me, an interesting distinction. With this statement, Shedroff recognizes that there is a quantifiable amount of information that needs to be addressed, specifically within the activity that you are currently trying to work with. This approach to problem solving will still necessitate a great deal of effort, specifically in the research and development phases, to map out the actual systems that are affected by the issue at hand. This approach also focuses on many factors that are often not addressed in current development/ design/ problem solving ventures, which is why it is so important. Where Systems Thinking fails in that its perspectives are often too broad, sustainability prevails because it requires the developer/ designer/ problem solver to view as many perspectives as possible—to be certain—but within the parameters of the problem itself.

To simplify (or perhaps clarify) his thinking, Shedroff adds: "A systems perspective [from his perspective] requires an appreciation (at minimum) and an understanding (at best) of how various systems interact with each other. These include environmental, financial, and social systems." (Shedroff & Lovins, 2009)

Sustainability does not require that our future developers/ designers/ problem solvers be experts in all fields, but in acknowledging all of the multiple perspectives related to the task at hand, they will approach their activities with more empathy and appreciation for all factors involved than most have up to this point in history.

For young designers, I see sustainability as an agreement with themselves, their peers, and their communities. It is an acknowledgement on the part of the individual that they will take more factors into account than an assignment or job

stipulates. Sustainability requires more work; more research, more development, more trial and error, more refining. But if we can train our young designers to see beyond the immediate benefits of a product or service, and to look at the long term effects of its existence, then we can begin to move towards creating products and services that last longer, reach more people, and not only have less impact upon, but perhaps even improve the ecological, economic and social systems that impact our lives.

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Todd Barsanti is a graphic designer and design educator. He has been operating his own design studio, Elemeno Inc. since 1998. He has also been teaching design at the post-secondary level since 2002. In 2011, he completed his Masters Degree in Environmental Studies with a concentration on Sustainable Design Education.