

Green Design vs. Sustainable Design

Posted by **Peter Nicholson**

When people use the term "sustainable design" with me, as a magazine editor did recently, my first question has become, what do you mean exactly? Their answer is, invariably, what I would consider "eco" or "green" design (be it in architecture or product design). Equating sustainability with eco or green is inaccurate.

Eco/green design is not the same as sustainable design, although it can be a subset of it. Reducing environmental impact is a worthy goal and an important discipline, but it's often far from striving for sustainability. Sustainable design involves an emerging design methodology, one that strives to understand the system in which a particular issue exists before attempting to solve it. Unlike just about every other design discipline, with sustainable design, the end product is not determined beforehand. Rather, it could be a product, a communication piece or campaign, a policy initiative, a building, a product service system, etc. Sustainable design is also a discipline which, in addition to the environmental, strives to at least acknowledge the social and economic ramifications (for starters) of a project as well.

As you might be thinking, this emerging discipline is difficult and requires greater and broader training than many designers ever attain. It demands that one be multilingual in the sense of being able to speak the language of design, business, marketing, environment, and public policy, for starters. The methodology is a fairly simple, something that I aspire to write more about in the coming months. I'll be the first to admit that we here at o2-Chicago/Foresight Design Initiative have yet to figure it all out; we're only beginning. But we aspire to refine and practice (and eventually teach) sustainable design, recovering (or creating as the case may be), a more values-based discipline.

A closing anecdote: I was walking down the street the other day with one of Chicago's leading "green" architects, a person whose firm designed one of only a handful of LEED "platinum" (the highest rating possible) certified buildings (LEED, for those who might not know, is a green building rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council). During a lull in our conversation he turned to me and said "You know, Peter, I'm really over green buildings." My mouth fell open in amazement. This person's firm **only** does green architecture and urban planning! "Uh, doesn't your livelihood sort of depend on them?" I replied. "Peter, I've come to realize that it's about **so** much else. We have to think bigger, think in terms of sustainable communities." Green buildings, he implied, are relatively simple in comparison.

As aspiring sustainable designers, we must continue to push the envelope well past the "green" threshold, and think and practice with greater holistic awareness. We should use terms carefully and, I hope, via mediums like this list, continue to delve deeper into the discussion and, more importantly, the practice.

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Do Green Design and Sustainable Design mean the same thing?

Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, there can be a subtle difference (e.g. green products specified for a sustainable project). Green Design often implies an interest in design that protects people's health and well-being (e.g., indoor air quality enhancement, use of 'natural' products, safer environments for people with allergies, asthma, or MCS). Sustainable Design often implies an interest in design that protects the global environment and the world's ecosystems for future generations (e.g. alternative energy sources, rain forest protection, resource depletion). The terms Green Architecture, Environmentally Responsible Design, and Environmentally Conscious Design are sometimes used to imply an interest in both green and sustainable design.

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