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Big/Small — What is our response_ability to serving society and community?

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“From the Ground Up: SEED® — Social Economic Environmental Design”

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Introduction:

I am excited to share with you today a research collaborative that I believe will fundamentally impact the way designers think about and engage in design process and outcome. Released to the public in March 2010, SEED®: Social Economic Environmental Design is a principle-based network “dedicated to building and supporting a culture of civic responsibility and engagement through design. It is an organized movement that promotes and celebrates the idea that design matters and all people can shape their world for the better through design. To achieve this goal, SEED provides a common standard to guide, evaluate and certify the social, economic and environmental impact of design projects.”¹ My presentation today will introduce you to the theoretical and practical frameworks that embody SEED and define how SEED can change your relationship to problem solving by problem seeking, working with community as client and documenting project results that evaluates how goals were met.

In my presentation I will use the word ‘design’ to refer to a broad spectrum of related design disciplines: communication design including interface, information architecture and interactive design; industrial design and product development; architecture and urban planning; landscape architecture and planning. In some cases engineers and social entrepreneurs are referenced under my design umbrella as well. While my point of view is informed by my own discipline of communication design, my research efforts and contribution to SEED has been through the

vision of interdisciplinary design practices. Thus SEED is interdisciplinary in nature, supporting a multifaceted scope of design efforts. Additional terms such as ‘community-based design’ and ‘design in the public interest’ refer to design practices that are people-centered and grassroots oriented where design for positive developmental impact is the goal.

Context:

Design is thriving today as a culturally relevant interface to experience and communication. Consumers from around the world who can afford design navigate augmented lifestyles where form and function are in high demand and speed and accessibility make our interactions all the more efficient. Design is ubiquitous and to a certain extent now taken for granted: A strange yet rapid historical evolution. The consumption of designed products and services is aligned with privilege further emphasizing the role desire plays in design versus need. Author and curator Barbara Bloemink observes, “We are surrounded by images of things designed for a culture with disposable income...”² This reflection on the evolving presence of design is driven around the specifics of audience and market—who are we designing for and how much are they willing to pay. To underscore this critique, International Development Enterprises founder, Dr. Paul Polak cites, “Ninety-five percent of the world’s designer’s focus all their efforts on developing products and services exclusively for the richest ten percent of the world’s customers.”³ SEED founder Bryan Bell further argues, “Designers have let these market forces alone determine whom we serve, what issues we address and the shape of all our design professions... How can we expand the practice of design to provide for the rest, the great number currently underserved, and [still] play an active role in responding to social challenges we face in the world?”⁴ If designers don’t design for the perceived majority, who is left and are their problems worth solving? Who will pay for design when issues of need overwhelm desire?

In the summer of 2007, curator Cynthia E. Smith presented “Design for the Other 90%” at the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. This was a landmark exhibition that revealed design as agent of change for the “other” — a segment of the world’s population not usually served by design often comprised of the poor and marginalized. The design solutions presented in this exhibit demonstrated the fundamental simplicity of need where basic necessities and arguably human rights were embraced. Issues such as access to healthcare, clean water,

education, shelter and the ability to cultivate fresh, locally grown foods, among many other issues, were positioned as quietly profound problems solved through design innovation and social entrepreneurship. The exhibition catalog cites statistics that reinforce the requirement for a realignment of design practice: “Ninety percent of the world’s total population lack the means to purchase basic goods”; “Almost half of the world’s population live on less than \$2 a day.”; “One in seven children have no access to health services.”; “One in five children have no access to safe water.”⁵

In November of 2007 I presented my own curatorial research on this subject in the exhibit “Substance: Diverse Practices from the Periphery”. This international exhibition of interdisciplinary design revealed how design innovation and engineering was impacting life in profound ways through a revolution of sorts. Audiences traditionally identified as minority groups were celebrated as the new majority. Here designers from around the world showed the impact of their research and design process efforts to address some of the necessities of life that we simply take for granted. Design for affordability, development, access, ownership, income-generation, health, mobility, and safety represent a few of the issues explored, propelling designers into the realm of problem seeking. In 2009 Emily Pilloton’s book, *Design Revolution: 100 products that empower people* was released. In the forward Allan Chochinov wonders, ... “what if [design] intention, from the get-go, is overtly aimed toward some social good? Does that change the kind of product we end up with?”⁶ It is this very line of questioning that informs the basis for SEED.

A Broad Introduction to SEED:

Today I will detail three major features of the SEED initiative: 1) social, economic and environmental concerns can not be ignored in design projects for development where the most essential needs of people are being addressed; 2) in order for design to make sound impact and tackle the requirements of diverse issue-oriented problems, communities and stakeholders must be directly involved in the project; and, 3) there needs to be accountability for design in the public interest where successes and failures can have dramatic outcomes—evaluation is at the heart of this issue and is a significant thread of SEED. Upon conclusion of these facets, I will provide a walk-through of the just released web-based tool called the SEED Evaluator which

unites content concerning social, economic and environmental design, community-based design and design evaluation.

1) A trio of concerns:

The European Union's 1992 Conference on Environment and Development (commonly referred to as the Earth Summit) focused on the pending harmony of social justice, economic development and environmental conservation as keys to sustainability—something that has only in recent years come into demonstrable favor. On the heels of this effort, author John Elkington coined the term “triple bottom line” to refer to this trio of concerns in his 1998 book, *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*. Elkington examines the role capitalism plays in measuring the performance of corporations against triple bottom line concerns. In 2000, the United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals were announced with the objective of reducing extreme poverty in some of the world's most desperate countries by 2015.⁷ Through the mission that “every person has the right to live in a socially, economically and environmentally healthy community,” SEED leverages the historical international development of the sustainability and poverty eradication movements through the discipline of design, relying upon the triple bottom line to inform practice, process and outcome. This is an important facet to the SEED philosophy and working methodology as related to tools for designers

Building on this momentum, SEED was first proposed during a 2005 meeting at the Harvard Graduate School of Design where architects, designers, and other diverse experts in the public interest design movement convened to evaluate how design could respond to the interconnected issues of social justice, economic development and environmental conservation.⁸ Since 2005, SEED has evolved into a global movement that responds to the increased need for design to impact positive change in the lives of people who traditionally are not served by design development usually due to inadequate resources. SEED positions the triple bottom line as a guide for designers to work with communities in the prioritization of actions stemming from the goals they need to accomplish in any given project. This triadic approach can allow communities to seek out or develop a project that meets several needs at once, for example education and job creation, or hunger and affordable housing. When needs are addressed separately, a community

can fail to use often-limited resources most effectively for the greatest impact. An integrated approach can create opportunities for multi-leveled outcomes that serve a variety of strategic needs.

With its mission, SEED is built upon the following five guiding principles:

- 1) Advocate with those who have a limited voice in public life.
- 2) Build structures for inclusion that engage stakeholders and allow communities to make decisions.
- 3) Promote social equality through discourse that reflects a range of values and social identities.
- 4) Generate ideas that grow from place and build local capacity.
- 5) Design to help conserve resources and minimize waste.

2) Engaging community participation:

SEED provides a philosophical as well as practical positioning that aligns designers and communities with the belief that inclusivity in design practice is one of the best ways to inform successful design outcomes. Thus, SEED promotes *dialogue* with relevant stakeholders, *transparency* in the design process and *results* that document how project goals were met. By providing a platform for designers, entrepreneurs, community members and vested project participants to connect with one another through an informed methodology a unified vision for project development can be achieved. SEED believes in the value of communication and understands the importance of actively involving participants in design development in order to most accurately meet project goals where the power of participatory decision-making can build consensus, establish priorities, and define project goals.

Engaging community participation requires input and/or field research including: Community Charrettes; Interviews; Discussion Groups; Photo or Video Ethnographies; Asset-based Development; Asset-based Design; Public Forums; Local, Regional, State or National Government Support; or Stakeholder Advisory Groups.⁹ These forums can provide opportunities to share knowledge, dialoguing on a larger scale about the nature of the problem and how members of a group can offer meaningful input on a project. By way of example, the non-profit research foundation Rocky Mountain Institute organized a community charrette for their Denver-

based Living City Block project in March 2010. My students and I were included in the charrette as part of research we were conducting on design solutions for Living City Block, a regenerative urban demonstration site.¹⁰ The charrette format brought together a large variety of individuals from diverse backgrounds described as stakeholders. Not uncommon to architecture and urban planning, the highly structured charrette format allowed for large group discussion with subgroup ideation. This charrette established definitive and actionable outcomes that were generated with almost 100% participant support in under three hours. It is this type of community-based activity that produces productive dialogue with results.

3) Accountability for design outcomes through evaluation:

Not often discussed in design is the role of evaluation in order to determine how effectively an implemented project met goals. Architecture is a field that achieves accountability through licensure. However in the field of communication design for example, there is little discourse about accountability because there are no readily used criteria for design evaluation. Because SEED aligns issue-based design problems with triple bottom line concerns, there is an imperative to measure the effectiveness of these projects. How were goals defined and accomplished? What was done well and what wasn't? What proof of accomplishment demonstrates that goals were met as anticipated in the project? Designers and others have a need to assess the outcome of their work just as clients and communities have a need to assess how goals were achieved for purposes of defining benchmarks and plotting progress toward common goals. Evaluation provides a road map, a directional pointer that can indicate vital strengths and weaknesses in a designed outcome.

SEED provides an evaluative component to its process because it is something we need—designers, communities and stakeholders need to understand the impact of the work and we need to be able learn from and leverage results in any given project so as to propel our discipline in a positive direction. Simply stated: Designers have a tremendous need to learn from the successes and failures of our efforts if we are to continue evolving as a field. Because SEED points to the problems of the marginalized as significant to designers' focus today, the requirement for solid and effective outcomes is all the more necessary—there is little room or time for misguided outcomes when designing for impact that effects positive change in peoples' lives.

The SEED Evaluator:

Now that I have shared the three major features of SEED, allow me to introduce you to its focal point, a significant tool developed exclusively for the purpose of helping guide a process that is informed by the SEED mission and principles—the SEED Evaluator. The SEED Evaluator is a communication instrument that allows designers and project participants to define goals for projects and then measure the success in achieving those through a third-party review. This tool can assist individuals, groups, designers, communities, project planners and other participants achieve like-minded goals that are focused on the triple-bottom line of social justice, economic development and environmental conservation. The SEED Evaluator provides guidelines for a design process directing participatory research practices and tools to document the goals, process and results of a project. Completion of the SEED Evaluator can lead to the optional SEED Certification process, which allows communities to develop their leadership and decision-making from within while using a proven method and recognized standard of success to document results of the work.¹¹

The SEED Evaluator responds to the questions many designers face today:

- How does this project create positive change in the face of social, economic and environmental challenges?
- How does the design product answer the short and long term needs of a community that validates ethical and sustainable approaches to design through a triple bottom line approach?
- How can the design team directly engage the client and other vested parties in the total project process so that the outcome is informed from the ground up, thus better ensuring more accurate results?¹²

The SEED Evaluator:

- Demonstrates the value of design;
- Reveals design relevance in addressing critical social, economic, and environmental issues;

- Establishes a participatory design process through a standard means;
- Explains the need for transparency in decision making with communities;
- Proves accountability of projects that make claims of assistance;
- Measures the positive impact of design and the growth of a community that shares common principles; and,
- Allows for efficient sharing of knowledge.¹³

How it works:

The SEED Evaluator is an online tool available at the SEED Network website www.seednetwork.org. As a means to bridge and document design process, it is intended for anyone to use but specifically created for designers, communities and stakeholders to share a common language as a mutual platform for pursuing collaborative project development. The SEED Evaluator aids communication between diverse parties and interests and allows for documentation of project changes that result from an informed and dialogue-based process.

The Evaluator takes its form as a dynamic metric that presents a body of comprehensive questions. These questions were developed to best understand the nature of the multifaceted design project, who it is serving, how it functions and what issues it addresses. Because SEED embraces project development that reflects the SEED mission and principles and the specific social, economic and environmental goals of a project, the content requested in the Evaluator is quite thorough. Project participants are asked to share their research processes, discuss how community was involved in project development, and assess outcomes related to social, economic and environmental objectives stated in the project description. Further questions delve into the project basics: who is involved, what is the project, what community is affected, and what are the cultural and historical implications of the work. Defining the social, economic and environmental goals, challenges and successes of a project and then providing evidence of process towards stated goals assists in substantiating the design outcome. Identifying benchmarks aid in defining direction and ideals. Documenting performance measures involves the quantifying of benchmarks and supports SEED's requirement for project verification through

evaluation of project completion and post implementation results. The resulting body of content provided through the framework of the SEED Evaluator thus provides comprehensive documentation of a project, its design process and outcome as checked against stated benchmarks and goals.

Documenting a project in this way can help designers and others understand successes and failures in an effort to more objectively identify best practices. It is this evaluation process that can lead a project applicant to the optional SEED Certification process.

A project is awarded SEED Certification when it has demonstrated that a community has effectively used design to overcome social, economic and environmental issues.

Communities and the designers that achieve this recognition leverage their accomplishment not only for their own goals but also for that of moving forward a process of inclusion and informed decision-making in design. Obtaining SEED Certification is the standard that community organizers, leaders, designers and funders alike can use to document their significant and valued achievements: It means that a project is recognized as having achieved levels of success within the qualitative and quantitative measures set forth within the SEED evaluation process. Being certified requires that minimum thresholds of the SEED mission and principles be met by the specific goals set within the project and that the project has met stated benchmarks. There are many design projects that claim to benefit people, but a SEED certified project is distinct because it has:

- Significant and documented community participation in project decisions;
- Measured results of the design product.¹⁴

And now I would like to take you on a brief tour of the SEED website, introducing to you the SEED Evaluator tool... (Conference presentation of website).

Conclusion:

SEED is timely. It offers to design practitioners, community members, students and educators a

model for pursuing an ethical and informed design practice. Identifying goals within a project that will deliver balanced social, economic and environmental outcomes is a challenge. Critically assessing those outcomes and evaluating the results is potentially transformative to our discipline. The triple bottom line is crucial to the type of problems SEED supports—design for underserved and marginalized individuals and communities. Here is a place where design can take great affect, often under the influence of little resources. Designing with an eye to the balance of life—how social equity, economic development and environmental justice must be addressed in any design outcome—is one path towards making positive impact in the lives’ of people. Doing so in a manner sensitive to the profound needs of people can move design to a needed and inevitable standard. My presentation today was intended to introduce you to the theoretical and practical frameworks that embody SEED. My hope is you see the potential for SEED in your own practice where you invite problem seeking, are open to working with community as client and are curious about the positive effects of evaluation of design outcomes.

NOTES:

¹ SEED Network, Network, “A Global Movement: A System of Support,” <http://www.seednetwork.org/network/>

² Barbara Bloemink “Foreword,” in *Design for the Other 90%*, (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 5-6.

³ Paul Polak, “Design for the Other 90%,” in *Design for the Other 90%*, (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 19.

⁴ Bryan Bell, “Expanding Design: Toward Greater Relevance in Expanding Architecture,” in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, ed. Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford (New York: Bellerophon Publications, Inc., 2008), 15.

⁵ Andrea Lipps, “Selected Statistics: The Other 90%” in *Design for the Other 90%*, (New York: Smithsonian Institution, 2007), 133-134. (References include: 1) U.S. Census Bureau; UN Development Program: Strategy and Business; 2) World Bank; 3) UNICEF; 4) UNICEF).

⁶ Allan Chochinov, “A Good Long Tradition,” in *Design Revolution: 100 products that empower people*, ed. Emily Pilloton (New York: Bellerophon Publications, Inc., 2009), 7.

⁷ United Nations, Millennium Development Goals, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

⁸ SEED Network, Home, “Welcome to SEED,” <http://www.seednetwork.org/>

⁹ Lisa M. Abendroth and Bryan Bell, “Planning your project and completing the SEED Evaluator: Engaging community participation,” in *SEED Evaluator and Certification Instructions*, (<http://www.seednetwork.org/>), 9.

¹⁰ Living City Block, “Welcome to Living City Block: Denver,” <http://www.livingcityblock.org/>

¹¹ SEED Network, “Evaluator,” <http://www.seednetwork.org/evaluator/>

¹² Lisa M. Abendroth and Bryan Bell, “About the SEED Evaluator and SEED Certification: What is the SEED Evaluator?,” in *SEED Evaluator and Certification Instructions*, (<http://www.seednetwork.org/>), 4.

¹³ Lisa M. Abendroth and Bryan Bell, “SEED Summary and Evaluator Instructional Overview: The Function of SEED,” in *SEED Evaluator and Certification Instructions*, (<http://www.seednetwork.org/>), 2.

¹⁴ Lisa M. Abendroth and Bryan Bell, “About the SEED Evaluator and SEED Certification: What is SEED Certification?,” in *SEED Evaluator and Certification Instructions*, (<http://www.seednetwork.org/>), 6.