Sustainable Innovation 2023
Accelerating Sustainability in the Creative Economy and Creative Industries
24th International Conference
Online Conference: 20th – 26th March 2023
Business School for the Creative Industries
University for the Creative Arts
Epsom, Surrey, UK

'It Depends' - Making Informed, Robust, Rigorously Tested Sustainable Design Decisions.

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There's never a straightforward answer when it comes to making sustainable design choices, something designers are increasing being asked to consider. Invariably, the answer is always 'it depends.'

Accelerating sustainability in creative industries will mean making the 'most sustainable' design choices, but these are frequently met with never ending conflicts, barriers and trade-offs. 'More important' and often competing agendas from different parts of an organisation can cause sustainability goals to pushed down the priority list. This overwhelming amount of information to factor in can lead to decision-paralysis or worse still, far-reaching and negative unintended consequences.

First, designers must ask what they are looking to have a positive impact on:
• CO2 reduction
• Recyclability and disassembly
• Resource depletion
• Water usage
• Weight reduction
• Waste elimination
• Circularity

Organisations and designers alike must ask themselves which impact categories they should be prioritising (humans, animals, ecosystems etc), based on what is the most relevant to their industry and what will have the biggest impact.

When sustainability initiatives focus on the wrong aspects, they risk overlooking other impacts which are orders of magnitude more damaging. Dramatic claims such as: "we reduced our use of water by 90%!" can be meaningless if this product only required a piecemeal amount of water to be produced in the first place.

Typically, a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) would be used undertaken to help inform these choices and they are widely considered to be an effective way to assess various environmental impacts. There are however, limitations and LCAs can be flawed with boundaries drawn too small and low quality data. There are several factors that are typically not considered when conducting a standard LCA such as recyclability, litter potential and environmental persistence. As a result, even with the best of intentions and the best data to hand it's possible to make a 'bad' decision.

Being 'more circular' also does not automatically make a product less damaging to the environment and it certainly doesn't make it benign. The circular economy is not immune to false green claims and greenwashing.

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If that wasn't enough to consider, creatives must also ask themselves what they are optimizing for and how to design for a world that needs to consume less.

What is this design prioritising?
• Reuse
• Disassembly
• Recycling
• Shared ownership
• Durability
• Modularity

Creatives may find themselves asking: "whose responsibility is it anyway?" Is it reasonable to expect those who work in the creative industry to have a deep understanding of nuanced and complex environmental issues? Do they have the time or the flexibility within a brief to do so? To accelerate sustainability, there's work for us to do in the creative sector to empower them with enough vocabulary and insight to navigate these complexities with confidence.

Working in a world where the least bad option is still nowhere near good enough, we have to face the fact that at some point, we have to make a decision and everything we do or make will impact the world around us. What we can do is aim to make informed, robust, rigorously tested and researched design decisions.