Designers in sustainability – are you taking it seriously?

BIDA would like to thank everyone who responded to our recent survey, which followed a webinar on the subject of the designer's role in providing sustainable solutions to global problems. The Design Council and the Design Business Association (DBA) have also been very active in exploring the related issues, which are clearly important irrespective of personal views on a designer's accountability. As might be expected the responses to BIDA questions were varied and in some situations reflected the persons individual situation.

This link will take you to the survey results https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-57D2MPVW/ and you can use the password BIDA to access.

Given the sample size, we are not claiming any definitive analysis, but we have identified four overall themes from the comments provided. The overall sample included:

Around 45% of respondents are working as designers, Around 20% employ designers, with a total 65% involved in design delivery. 26% are involved with design education, divided between 15% design students and 11% are design educators. Around 9% are described as 'others'. The professional designers – range from people with a layman knowledge through to deploying and defining sector leading sustainability practice - a wide spread of responses and probably dependent on the type of company they work for i.e., small generalist companies to larger consultancies with-in house specialist expertise. A narrower spread of employers say they use some or regularly integrate sustainability practice within their work. Students – all claim to use some level of sustainability practice in their work whilst the educators group ranged from having layman knowledge through to those deploying and defining sector leading sustainability practice. Others – included a researcher in sustainable design.

The survey gave the option to provide anonymous comments with views on the profession's readiness to respond to sustainability: Within the selected comments below, organised into four themes, there were some diverse and perhaps controversial views which make for some interesting reading. Opinions vary from those who think that designers should concentrate on 'what they do best', to those who report; they are able, but not empowered; they are unprepared; and they need to form connections to be effective.

We need to make it clear that BIDA are not currently endorsing any of these views, so present the themes as questions and we do believe it necessary to continue the debate and define some positive actions.

1 Designers are not fully responsible - or shouldn't be responsible?

- Design, as a B2B activity is divorced twofold from the impacts of sustainability. As a design agency, we do not sell products to end users, we sell design activity - we always encourage clients to take the more sustainable path, but ultimately, they are our paymasters. This means that, though we would like to create a product that is best for the end user, the planet, and its

future inhabitants... most of the time we are forced to create something that pleases the ego and the business model of the clients alone.

- Designing single use disposable medical devices makes it difficult to meet some sustainability objectives. Reusing such devices might be feasible in some cases, but would require regulatory approval for the cleaning, sterilisation, and reuse protocols. The FDA are actively looking into the possible reuse of certain single use devices.

- Designers are keen to be more sustainable, but most businesses aren't

- Manufacturers need to look further than their profits if sustainable product consumption is to succeed.

- Not much being done - if we look at industry and manufacturing - yes: many fantastic start-ups with sustainability at its heart but the big corps have miles and miles to go.

- Hopefully not ready [to engage with sustainability] and they are ignoring it. It's a total distraction from the role of designers and engineers, who should be solving clients' problems with great and effective designs - not acting as if they know and think of themselves as better than the general public, or, in the worst case, trying to change the public's behaviour.

- Consumer is still boss without more regulation, but businesses are improving on awareness and action, albeit not at a faster rate of change many of us would prefer.

- Suspect more needs to be done esp. re supply chain issues/verification(s)

2 Designers are willing or ready, but not able to deliver?

- In my opinion designers are ready but it's the ability to convince other business professionals that they should step off the well-worn path that is the biggest hurdle to designers.

- The complexity of terminology in the space makes it difficult for consumers to understand the actual impact of what they're buying. 'Degradable' 'biodegradable' 'compostable' and 'recyclable' all mean completely different things, but many professionals get them confused - let alone consumers. Greenwashing is rife, and it's difficult for both brands and consumers to make truly sustainable choices. The design industry is also being held back by a lack of cost-effective, functional and commercially viable sustainable materials. Whether it be a need for food / medical grade polymers or even just a specific colour, in many cases truly sustainable and commercially viable options simply don't exist. In many areas the design profession is working hard to make a meaningful impact. But it feels like there is still a big gap between the level of sustainability that everyone wants, and what the industry is currently able to provide on a large scale.

- More designers need to feel confident to say no to bad clients and bad briefs that do not take sustainability into account. Designers are the gatekeepers to bad design reaching the world.

- Majority of designers and manufacturers have been active on this for years. Educating of the public is required rather than the hysterics in MSM and social media, factual knowledge, not hearsay in order to make rational plans over material usage.

- Willing but not fully able. There's a need to sort truths and best practice from disruptive greenwashing and hearsay.

3 In general designers are not fully prepared?

- The profession is extremely unprepared. It [sustainability] is not taught in universities as widely as it should be or in the necessary detail. There is too much professed commitment with too little knowledge or application on the scale that is needed to make the needed impact.

- Overall, fairly poor

- There seems to be a general awareness for the importance of sustainability in design but no sufficient knowledge on how to design sustainable effectively.

- Seem most design consultants are at base camp level, not do not understand circular economy well

- I would judge the profession's track record and readiness to be generally poor

- Due to the inherent differences in different design consultancies - size, specialisations, structures etc. It's difficult to generalise. Some larger companies have internal expertise, but smaller companies are in general unprepared and need advice on how to incorporate external expertise.

4 Designers have a role, but a multidisciplinary approach is needed?

- I believe that design has an instrumental role to play in sustainability, however in my opinion the sector seems to be reinventing the wheel somewhat by approaching environmental problems from a mostly design-centric perspective. Whilst valuable, it doesn't account for the decades of work that has taken place in the world of sustainability and innovation which offers much insight to the challenges faced and how to overcome them. Hence, rather than seeking to solve sustainability challenges in a silo, I think design should work closely with sustainability experts with the aim of learning from them and the wide range tools that exist in that space, but also to disseminate design methods to them and guide their application. Moreover, I think design can play a critical role in engaging with businesses and clients by acting as agents for change, for instance via the Carbon Literacy for Designers course available from A Good Design Studio. I think that the role of Business Analysts should not be overlooked too. The Design Community depends on these professionals to understand the scope of the work they are undertaking, and this community should be unskilled to better perform environmental assessments such as carbon accounting. Finally, I believe that the concept of empathy needs to be extended beyond end-user and stakeholder empathy and to consider systems-level empathy, including, for example concepts of social justice, healthy and thriving societies and the environment. I believe that to do this it is essential to enhance the competence of the design community in understanding these issues, the challenges that we face, and the complex solutions that are arising. Again, I believe that carbon literacy training offers a readymade solution for this, especially considering tool kits for this already exist such as that provided by A Good Design Studio. The challenge of sustainability is broad, infinitely complex and the solutions highly specialised. For that reason, I think it will be difficult for designers alone to solve these challenges, and that multi-skilled design teams that include traditional design

experts, and sustainability professionals are likely to be the optimal way of the community contributing to the climate emergency and our other societal challenges.

- There are many new technologies (digital, for example) where understanding their impact and opportunity to support sustainability is under researched

- I believe that not just the environmental aspect also social aspect of sustainability should be analysed and implement on new designs and business models.

- Sustainable design uptake seems to be considered as a "trend" or optional factor within some industries, rather than a vital element as key to the design project as a quote or CPA. Our biggest challenge as we adopt sustainability as standard practice will be a lack of historical and consistent data. After all, metrics and measures of sustainability mean little without comparison, and our hesitation to define and implement industry wide definitions will hold us back significantly. It will take several years to build up the data that allows us to measure improvements and identify potential areas for development. Instead, we hold a finger to the air and make a best guess as to what we can improve - a poor basis for industry wide change!