

## Blue Planet Run Ann Arbor

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Written Thesis

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“The [environmental and social justice movement] can’t be divided because it is so atomized – a collection of small pieces, loosely joined. It forms, dissipates, and then regathers quickly, without central leadership, command, or control. Rather than seeking dominance, this unnamed movement strives to disperse concentration of power...

**Its clout resides in its ideas, not in force.”**

— Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest*

## We are in the midst of a series of water crises,

both globally and locally. One in five people worldwide lacks access to safe drinking water, and many have to walk long distances in order to collect water. Michigan, despite the abundance of water from the Great Lakes, has its own water crises surrounding the use (or misuse) and treatment (or mistreatment) of the Great Lakes and other bodies of water. Locally, in Ann Arbor, the development of land around the Huron River is putting our hydrology systems at risk.

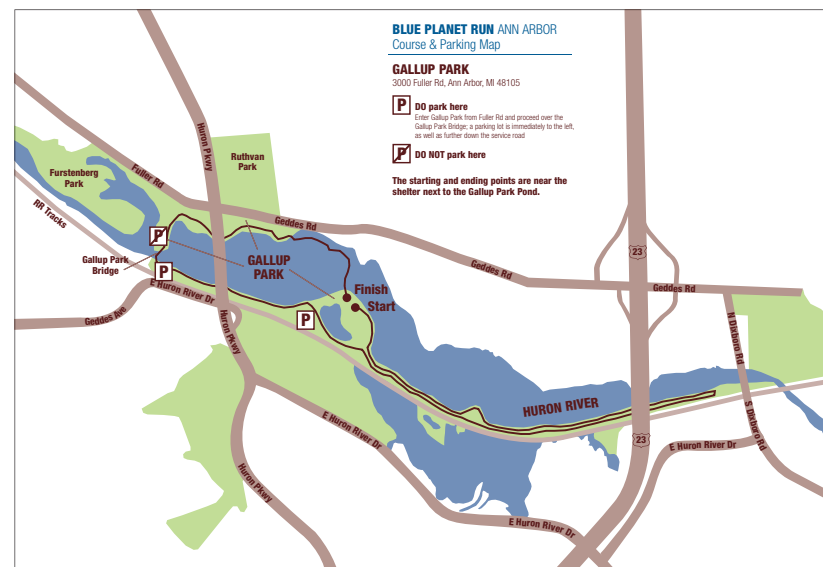
The aim of my Integrative Project was to bring an awareness of these water crises, particularly the global ones, to a place (Michigan) that is surrounded by water. By presenting a series of visual, conceptual, intellectual and physical juxtapositions, I hoped that my audience would gain a greater understanding of their relationship to water (global and local), of the world's relationship to water, and of Michigan's unique relationship to the world. I wanted people to realize that our treatment (and mistreatment) of water is directly related to our treatment (and mistreatment) of human beings. Ultimately, then, through community involvement, I wanted to inspire in people a sense of hope. By participating in my event, people were actively making a difference to help eradicate the water crisis and will hopefully carry that sense of willingness with them long after the event. My thesis project sought to educate and express, through visual communication and community involvement, the connection and relationship between humanity and water.

The community event was a six-kilometer run/walk, which traced the Huron River, here in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The six-kilometer distance of the run was integral to the cause, for it is the average distance that women in Africa and Asia walk to collect water. The participation of runners/walkers is threefold: Upon registration, the participants donated \$20, which goes toward the implementation of water systems around the world. Secondly, they participated in a symbolic way. The dedication, commitment, perse-

verance and drive it took to complete the run parallel the dedication, commitment, perseverance and drive it takes to provide safe and accessible water to the world. While the goal may at times have seemed unattainable, the completion of the run showed that a seemingly unattainable goal is possible. Thirdly, the participants, because of the six-kilometer distance, envisioned themselves in the position of those who must travel the same distance to collect water. Because participants physically ran/walked six kilometers (an activity that in our culture is largely recreational), the run put in first-person perspective the distance that many people must travel on foot for water, an activity that is essential to their daily existence. Throughout the course of the run/walk, the irony of participants' close proximity to water spoke further about their relationship to water, telling them to not take Michigan's waters for granted. The parallel of these relationships of people to water provided participants with an intellectual and physical juxtaposition that was altogether striking, ironic, and poignant.

The visual aspect of my thesis involved a series of visual communication pieces that lead up to and took part in the running event. In Linda Frye Burnham's *The Citizen Artist*<sup>1</sup>, she expressed that the effectiveness of a community art event can be strengthened by expanding the initiative "spatially and temporally." Expanding the initiative spatially means reaching a greater number

of people and dispersing information and awareness to a broader spectrum of people. I expanded the initiative spatially through the direct, active involvement of people on a grassroots level. Expanding the initiative temporally means communicating and reinforcing the message over a greater length of time. I expanded the initiative through time by distributing visual communication leading up to, during, and after the actual event. This series of reinforced communication through time will have a longer-lasting effect on my audience.

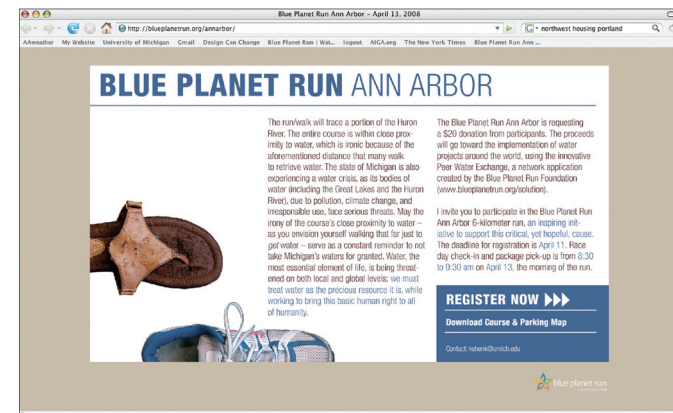
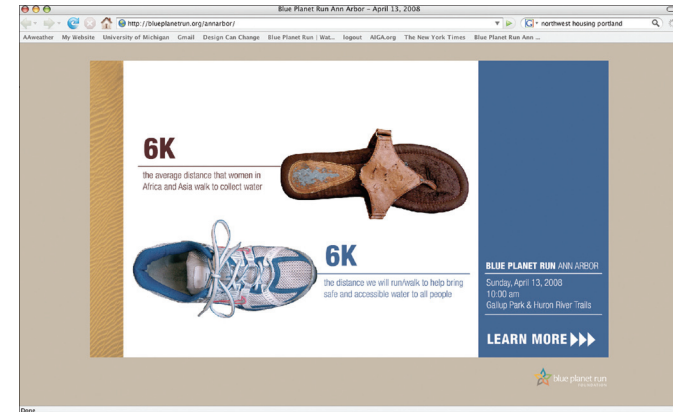


Course Map (Gallip Park, Huron River)



Poster

The first in this sequence were posters and cards that promoted the event and inspired people to participate in such a critical cause. The posters/cards relied on the parallel between traveling on foot to collect water (represented by a worn and weathered sandal) and traveling on foot to help solve this problem (represented by a bright, well-kept running shoe). The running shoe image reached my audience of runners and walkers, while also playing a part in a larger visual metaphor. The complementary sandal was a visual symbol of the wear, tear, and stress of walking daily to collect water. By presenting one of each shoe, the viewer was able to position him/herself in both the role of a runner and in the role of one walking for water. The use of this footwear humanized the issues at hand (which may have been abstract to people), and emphasized that water issues are human issues. The linearity of the form lent itself to the linearity of walking/running; the ultimate destination is water. The posters and cards also communicated to people the event, where and when it was to take place, and directed them to the web site for more written information and registration. The web site continued the sandal/running shoe theme, using time-based media to give the illusion that the shoes were walking. The web site provided more information about the event and its purpose, and also showed a striking image of women walking through the desert with large water jugs.

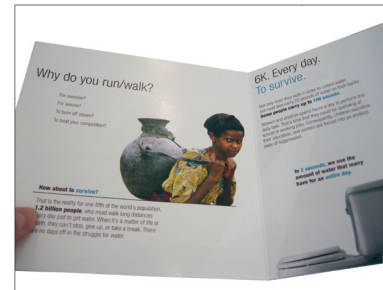


Web Site ([www.blueplanetrun.org/annarbor](http://www.blueplanetrun.org/annarbor))



Run/Walk Package

The second portion of visual communication in the series was a package that I gave to all registered participants before the run/walk. Inside a blue envelope was a pair of shoestrings and a designed, printed brochure. The brochure was an educational tool to explain water issues, while also seeking to strike an emotional chord with and inspire runners and walkers before the race began. The text in the piece began: “Why do you run/walk? For exercise? For leisure? To burn off steam? To beat your competition? ...How about to survive?” The text, imagery, and layout communicated to viewers the world’s water situation. Next, it showed a map that depicted global water shortages, and visually displayed how much water is available for use on the globe (less than 1%). The information then flowed to communicate issues that are relevant to Michigan and Ann Arbor, such as the Great Lakes and the Huron River. Finally, the piece suggested to viewers what more they can do to help the water crisis.



Brochure





The poster, web site, and participant package lead up to and culminated in the running event on April 13, 2008. I sought to make the run/walk as visual as possible. The course, as it traced the Huron River, was surrounded by water, an important visual component to the theme and cause of the event. Secondly, I had signs along the course that could be seen and understood very quickly as participants ran or walked by. The text on these signs used strong, simple phrases such as “6K. Every day. To survive.” and “1 in 5 lacks water.” I wanted to continually remind people along the six-kilometer course why they were participating in this critical cause.



**Banner**



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The visual language employed in each of these designs was inspired by a series of artists and designers working in the realm of environmental and social justice initiatives. *The Graphic Imperative*<sup>2</sup>, an exhibition at the University of Michigan School of Art & Design's Slusser Gallery featuring posters dealing with issues of peace, environment, and social justice, was of particular interest because the posters each have strong conceptual ideas that were communicated simply, effectively, and with impact. I also had conversations with two of the three co-curators in January 2008, which further supported the show's importance to my Integrative Project. Elizabeth Resnick gave a presentation in which she spoke about the power of using two different elements, that, when combined, create a new, third image or message (principles of gestalt). Chaz Maviyani-Davies, the other co-curator, who gave a visiting artist presentation here at Michigan and whose work runs along the same vein as *The Graphic Imperative*, was another precedent who works in media and themes similar to my own. My third primary inspiration was a collection of posters from a collection called "Water for Humankind"<sup>3</sup>. The striking, and sometimes disturbing, graphics of all of these collections showed me the importance and effectiveness of using strong conceptual messages, metaphors, and juxtapositions to drive the message. My information and research was derived primarily from the Blue Planet Run Foundation and an exhibition called *H<sub>2</sub>O = Life*<sup>4</sup>, which was at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. This exhibition gave me substantial supporting information about people and water and also gave me an in depth and comprehensive view of water.

My interest and involvement with water issues and the idea of holding a run was strongly influenced by the Blue Planet Run<sup>5</sup>. The Blue Planet Run conducted an around-the-world relay of 20 people, 24/7, for three months to spread the news of the global water crisis. Initially, my interest in running drew me to this initiative, but resulted in a desire to learn as much as possible about water, globally and locally, and a desire to take action. With my thesis project, I passed on to other runners (and walkers) the knowledge and inspiration that was given to me by the Blue Planet Run. By tapping into a specific community of people, I was able to reach people that may not ordinarily become involved. I expanded and extended the initiative of the Blue Planet Run by bringing water issues to a local grassroots effort, in which anyone capable of running/walking

could participate. I also built on the cause by making people in the Ann Arbor community consider water from both global and local levels, and their relationship to water at each of these levels. The inclusion of local issues drove the message home and ultimately gave better visibility to the global concerns.

While my running event may not have been on the same scale as the Blue Planet Run, I gave impact to the event through conceptually integrated details (like the distance of the run) and visual communication that educated, reinforced, and expressed the greater purpose of the event: to provide the world with safe drinking water and to make people consider the relationship between water and humanity. Paul Hawken stated in his book *Blessed Unrest*<sup>6</sup>: "The way we harm the earth affects all people, and how we treat one another is reflected in how we treat the earth." This statement embodies the direct relationship between water and humanity, and is an integral piece of the message I wanted to send to my participants. Despite our water crises, I believe there is hope in humanity and our willingness to achieve social and environmental justice. Hawken stated: "At the heart of [the environmental and social justice movement] is not technology, but relationships, tens of millions of people working toward restoration and social justice." My community event and visual communication may represent a small portion of this movement; however, making people aware of human/water relationships has helped them understand the way they treat (or mistreat) water and consider the effect this has on human beings. As a result of this educational and inspirational foundation, participants may then expand the initiative in their own unique way.

## Footnotes

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- 1** Burnham, Linda Frye. *The Citizen Artist*. Gardiner, NY: Critical Press, c1998.
- 2** *The Graphic Imperative*. Curated by Elizabeth Resnick, Frank Baseman, and Chaz Maviyane-Davies. Traveling exhibition, on view at University of Michigan Jan. 7, 2008 to Jan. 25, 2008. <[www.thegraphicimperative.org](http://www.thegraphicimperative.org)>.
- 3** "Water for Humankind." <[www.eauhumanite.com](http://www.eauhumanite.com)>.
- 4** *H<sub>2</sub>O = Life*. American Museum of Natural History. Curated by Dr. Eleanor J. Sterling. <[www.amnh.org/exhibitions/water](http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/water)>.
- 5** Blue Planet Run. <[www.blueplanetrun.org](http://www.blueplanetrun.org)>.
- 6** Hawken, Paul. *Blessed Unrest*. New York: Viking, 2007.