

Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project

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Senior Integrative Project

There is nothing more eye opening than those moments when reality slaps you in the face, forcing you to step back and evaluate your current situation. Over a year ago, this happened to me when I realized campus sidewalks, hallways, and garbage cans were full of discarded promotional material that I had designed for The University of Michigan's student publication, *The Michigan Daily*. Responding to this realization, I didn't take offense to the fact that students weren't taking the time to experience the booklet I designed; I instead felt disgusted that through a piece which bore my creative touch, I contributed to the continual build-up of waste materials. Inspired by this uncomfortable experience, I began to question my role within the design community and how the work I was producing affected my surrounding environment. More than anything, I began trying to figure out where I fit into the discussion of environmentally conscious design, along with what other creative individuals had to say about this same topic.

Diving into the current conversation of design's role in the environment through various publications, websites, and blogs, I quickly took notice of the work of AIGA, the professional association for design. Specifically interested in their involvement with The Urban Forest Project (UFP)—a collaborative public design exhibition exploring the issues of sustainability through the metaphors, symbols, and forms associated with the tree—I decided to pursue an Ann Arbor implementation as a basis for my senior Integrative Project. In doing so, I began to explore the role of coordinator, curator, and designer, with the goal of contributing to and igniting conversation within the local community. Coordinating with the AIGA Detroit board, I have worked on logistical issues like finding printers, contacting city organizations, and setting up PR opportunities. Curating the project, I have gathered all of the work from participating designers and figured out how the show is exhibited within its public space. Showcasing this work, I have designed a comprehensive exhibition catalog for the Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project, showcasing all of the individual banner designs in addition to excerpts from the informal conversations/interviews I had with each of the participants.



[left to right: The Urban Forest Project logo; banner hanging in Times Square; banners in Denver]

The Urban Forest Project History

Conceived by non-profit organization Worldstudio Foundation in conjunction with AIGA New York and Times Square Alliance, The Urban Forest Project was established as a unique outdoor design exhibition aiming to raise awareness about sustainability issues in an urban setting. With the first exhibition taking place in New York City's Times Square, 185 designers from 21 countries came together to create banners which were displayed on the various lamp posts lining the city streets. Effectively creating an outdoor gallery/ "forest" of visual work in the urban environment, each designer responded to the Urban Forest Project's prompt to use the tree as a metaphor to explore an issue they found pressing or relevant. Furthering the sustainable goals of the project, each banner was converted into a useful tote bag and sold to benefit a local charity following the completion of the installation. Taking advantage of the momentum generated by the success of the New York installation, the project branched out to Portland, Oregon, and Denver, Colorado. Throughout all of the installations, each local AIGA chapter has been integral in planning the event, teaming up with charities and organizations in their respective cities.

Examining these goals and origins behind The Urban Forest Project, I couldn't help but relate my own experiences and interests regarding the issues of design and sustainability. Using the banners as a material to construct tote bags created a complete product life cycle, giving each piece a second design life beyond its intended communicative purpose. Relating back to the feelings associated with seeing the wastefulness of my design efforts, this model struck me as a great step in furthering the possibilities of one's design work. Additionally, the overall collaborative and public aspects of the project drew me in, showing great potential for conversation within the design community and the local community surrounding the exhibition. Stemming from the uncertainties surrounding my own role as a designer and a consumer, I figured it would be helpful to stimulate dialogue and hear what others in the design community had to say. With The Urban Forest Project holding all of this potential, I decided to focus my efforts on bringing it to Ann Arbor.



[Main Street in Ann Arbor, site of the exhibition]

Ann Arbor Planting

Before presenting this idea to anyone, I knew that it was necessary to figure out an answer to the question, "Why have the Urban Forest Project in Ann Arbor?" With the original exhibition in Times Square, there was an almost perfect venue to address the issue of environmental sustainability, given its very urban, consumer-driven surrounding. It made sense that these banner designs were bringing an element of the forest into a space where really no trees are present. Moving onto Portland and Denver, the focus seemed to be on the issues related to a city that has a mixed metropolitan/natural landscape. Focusing on Ann Arbor, it seemed to share the same issues found in cities like Portland and Denver, as the downtown area and campus intermix with the natural surroundings. Adding to this physical environment, the city

has recently taken strides forward with community-wide environmental initiatives through various Ann Arbor organizations. For example, in the summer of 2007, the Downtown Development Authority approved a \$63,000 grant to fully convert all of the downtown street lights (over 1,000) to energy-efficient LED lights (www.a2dda.org/dda_achievements). Additionally, The Ride—Ann Arbor Transportation Authority “is the first public transit operator in the Midwest to state its intention to convert to all hybrid electric buses,” having already converted over twenty as of March 2008 (www.theride.org/bug.asp). Installing The Urban Forest Project in Ann Arbor would be a way to celebrate these accomplishments, showcasing the community’s overall commitment to environmentally sound practices.

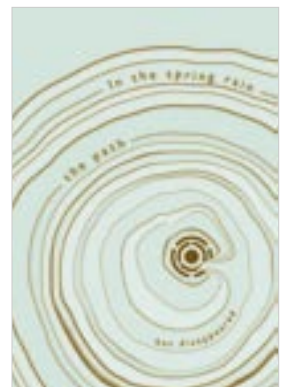
To begin my process, it was necessary to contact not only someone directly involved with The Urban Forest Project, but also the local AIGA Detroit chapter in order to create a solid base and understanding of the feasibility of exhibiting in Ann Arbor. After initial email contact with one of the founders, Mark Randal of Worldstudio Foundation, and AIGA Detroit student education chair Kelly Salchow, interest was shown, and I was prompted to do some more logistical research. This included deciding on the venue and all regulations involved, researching printers while getting price quotes on materials and printing processes, and searching and contacting potential sponsors to cover the funding. After gaining the initial understanding of all of the work involved, I brought my proposal to the AIGA Detroit executive board. After about a two to three week deliberation period, they decided that The Urban Forest Project was a good fit for their organization, and officially accepted my proposal. Working closely with the AIGA board, I would be taking on responsibilities of coordination, design, and final curatorial duties.

Receiving the approval from AIGA was a huge step in the progress of the Ann Arbor Urban Forest Project, as they act as a central connecting point for design culture in Michigan. Besides wanting to uphold the relationship established with the first New York Urban Forest Project, working with them provided greater access to the network of Michigan designers and various companies that support design. Because the exhibition relies heavily on collaboration, being able to contact a variety of designers located both in and outside of Ann Arbor was absolutely necessary. These connections came to be especially helpful when it came time to secure a financial sponsor for the banner printing, as AIGA Detroit president Craig Steen was able to negotiate with o2 Creative Solutions to donate the funds. Also, the Detroit chapter is

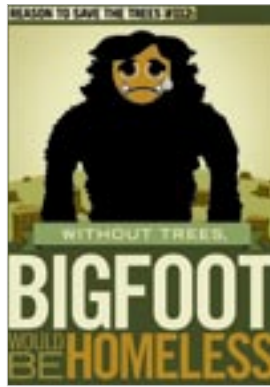
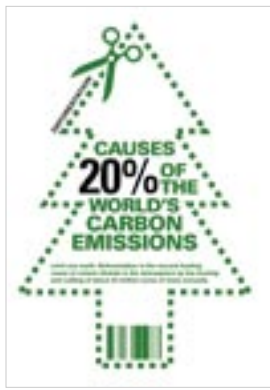
currently in a state of growth, as they are really trying to solidify Michigan's design credibility and bring more of a public awareness and excitement to the potential of design. Endorsing projects like this in an area like Ann Arbor proves that AIGA Detroit is committed to encouraging the advancement of design beyond the Metro Detroit area.

For the actual "planting" of Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project, the thirty-five banner designs are showcased on the light posts lining the central location of the city's Main Street. Each participating designer was given the prompt: "Use the form, idea, or character of a tree to interpret and explore a pressing issue or a personally intriguing or entertaining idea relating to the local environment." In response, the designers submitted a diverse batch of work, ranging from light-hearted themes involving a homeless bigfoot to engaging images of social commentary. My own banner design celebrates the progress of Ann Arbor, highlighting the fact that the city just recently converted all of their street lights to LED bulbs. Because the light poles also hold the final banners on Main Street, the design stands as a representation of the overall project. With the single street light standing above all of the surrounding trees, I wanted to play with the contrasting relationship between urban and forest, while literally showing how these new LED bulbs bring a positive light to the situation.

Printed on ecophab—a vinyl substitute woven using fibers created from one hundred percent recycled plastic soda bottles—with water-based inks, each banner is created using environmentally friendly processes and materials. All of the printing is to be done by Banner Creations, Inc. of Minneapolis, Minnesota, a leader in environmentally friendly printing and manufacturing. Once the banners are taken down from the Main Street exhibition, each banner will be repurposed into tote bags, which will be sold to benefit the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor. The sale of the bags will take place at a silent auction to be held during a closing event hosted by AIGA Detroit in celebration of the entire project. With a diverse guest list consisting of the participating designers, AIGA members, and individuals from the Ann Arbor community, the event will have a social function, but will also provide a chance for everyone to continue the dialogue started as a result of the project.



[banner designs for Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project. top left: my design]



[the rest of the banners]



[top: cover for the exhibition catalog; bottom: examples of spreads from exhibition catalog]

Creative Work

As a comprehensive summary of the entire project, the exhibition catalog showcases my most significant creative contribution to Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project. To gather the material for the exhibition catalog, interviews were conducted with just about all of the participating designers. I was able to visit with most of them in person at their offices, home studios, and classrooms, while the rest were conducted via phone and email. These conversations provided an opportunity to discuss submitted designs, personal philosophies or styles, and views on the future of design in regards to the changing environment. Combining my initial desires to create an open dialogue surrounding the issues of environmental sustainability with my own design practices, the exchange involved in the process leading to the creation of the exhibition catalog represents a step in the direction towards figuring out my own role as a designer in an ever-changing social and physical environment. By far the most significant learning experiences came from being able to converse with a wide variety of creative individuals. Whether they were corporate designers, freelance designers, or design educators, each individual brought a different perspective to the table, and the opportunity to speak with each person was easily the most significant learning experience of the entire process.

For the actual design of the exhibition catalog, the first problem that needed to be solved was how to design a document that would utilize the paper being used. After experimenting with different forms and possible sizes, I decided to create an 8.5" x 5.5" book so four of my pages could fit onto one sheet of paper. While selecting the paper stock, I researched many different companies and vendors, eventually choosing to use a Mohawk product made of one hundred percent post consumer waste fiber. The layout design is clean and simple, allowing the banner artwork to be the most important visual element on the spread. For exhibition purposes, the first copy of the book was hand-made, using a local digital printer and a simple binding process. Eventually, the catalog is going to be printed professionally and distributed to each of the participating designers and donors. I will be working with the printer, choosing materials and processes that have a low environmental impact.

Throughout the development of my senior project, I have tried to make sense of my own role as a creative individual and the resulting effect on the environment. While assuming the role of designer, coordinator, curator, or some hybrid of all three, my experiences with Ann Arbor: The Urban Forest Project have allowed me to initiate and participate in a conversation that will hopefully continue long after the banners are taken down from Main Street. Whether it's a designer explaining alternative communication methods to their clients or a proud tote bag owner standing out in the grocery line with their unique plastic bag alternative, it's encouraging to know that this project has the potential to produce one of those slapped in the face by reality moments.

Works Cited

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