

In Progress

A department about design that seeks to make a difference.



Washing Won't Wash

A leading design agency in London is truly upping the standards of responsible design around the world.

by Alex Harrell

Sustainable design has been a buzz phrase circulating in both the design and consumer communities for the past decade. And any movement that attempts to bring systematic or overriding “good” to capitalism is eventually prone to “washing.” Consider the misguided portmanteau pinkwashing that occurs when a company supports breast cancer-related charities in an effort to promote itself, or the bluewashing of businesses loudly touting their humanitarian contributions for gain. Well, sustainable design is not exempt from this phenomenon, either.

Enter greenwashing: What EnviroMedia Social Marketing defines as “when a company or organization spends more time and money claiming to be ‘green’ through advertising and marketing than

actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact.”

Enter Thomas.Matthews: A London-based award-winning communication design agency that focuses on sustainability. And yes, it *really* does focus on sustainability. Founded in 1997, the company is now celebrating 20 years of creating solutions engineered for the environment and social change, working with clients from governments to global corporations to charities, and overwhelmingly attempting to eradicate greenwashing.

“It’s important to us to not go out and help sell products on a lie that aren’t actually making any impact,” says Sophie Thomas, founding director of Thomas.Matthews.

Keeping to this viewpoint, Thomas’ Twitter bio reads, “Waste is a design

flaw.” This credo reigns true beyond her avatar and is the foundation on which Thomas.Matthews was built.

Thomas met Kristine Matthews while the two were completing Masters of Arts degrees at the Royal College of Art and working on a project that examined the amount of waste produced by the school’s café. It was nearly 6,000 polystyrene cups a week. This “ridiculous” conclusion, as Thomas puts it, led the two to develop a style of working based on intervention and engagement, with sustainability at its core.

For several years after, they worked in the public realm around the notion of city regeneration—“The way we walk through cities, the way we interact with spaces, the way that we work and talk to each other as a community and as a society,” Thomas explains—and developed social change campaigns through charity work with organizations such as Action Aid and Greenpeace.

In those early years, Thomas.Matthews emerged as a leader in designing with the world in mind, and it all seemed quite novel—though now, Thomas admits, sustainable design is a much more common notion.

But challenges still exist. One of the biggest in the industry involves the aforementioned greenwashing, and knowing how to take on the right clients—differentiating between the companies that are truly committed to a cause, and those that are not.

“We’re sort of known for not doing greenwash,” Thomas says. “If somebody comes to us and says they want to do this amazing project, we’re like, ‘Well, do you want to do it, or do you just want to have a nice brochure?’”

Which is fair. Sustainable design is more than a pretty brochure made from recycled materials. To remain authentically ecologically sound, Thomas.Matthews pushes its clients to go beyond a single PR-facing green campaign through a top-down mission aimed at improving its clients’ businesses on a day-to-day basis.



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TAMARA PIÑA

Opposite page: Sophie Thomas. At left: Publication exploring “the role of design in the circular economy” for The Royal Society of Arts’ Great Recovery project.

“If we can help people understand how they can change the way they design and the way they can talk to their customers, that has much bigger traction in the long run,” Thomas says. “For us, it’s also about what impact we can have and how we can help people change their behavior within their business.”

A few of Thomas.Matthews’ validating projects: The Great Recovery project for the Royal Society of the Arts, with a mission statement of creating a neutral space where all disciplines can learn from each other to build initiatives that move us toward a circular economy; Your Ocean for the National Maritime Museum, one of the first sustainable galleries in London that presents challenging issues surrounding humankind’s connection with, and impact on, the ocean; and Earth Centre for the Millennium Commission, a visitor attraction promoting sustainable living, created on the site of a former coal mine.

Overall, one reason clients may be hesitant to commit could be the stigma that sustainable design is inherently more expensive.

“Our clients are always willing to do it as long as it doesn’t change the output and it’s easy for them, and they don’t feel like it’s going to be an extra cost just because we are doing it sustainably,” says Tamara Piña, a designer at Thomas.Matthews. “Which is why sometimes we don’t even say, ‘Hey, we are doing it sustainably.’ It’s just like, this is the way we work, and we don’t think any other way, so it’s not like we have to sell you the sustainable label. The job is going to be done the same.”

Which is another reason why greenwashing is so pervasive—fully selling sustainability on the design end can be difficult as well.

“A lot of designers say they do it as a given, and I question whether they do it completely, properly, as much as they thoroughly can,” Thomas says. “I think we push [sustainability] much more than a lot of design studios do.”

In spite of the challenges that sustainable design presents, the driving reasons behind it will always remain the same, and therefore continue to propel—and necessitate—work like Thomas.Matthews’.

“We are running out of resources, and each one of us, including the creative industry, must start taking responsibility for the impact of our decisions,” says Piña.

It’s a simple idea that’s not-so-simple to execute. But for Piña, sustainability gave her newfound purpose as a designer and creative.

“We’re trying to give something back to society from a profession where it’s sometimes difficult to feel like you’re bringing anything good to the group,” she says. “It’s satisfying to see how complex concepts can be explained simply without losing aesthetic value.”

And for Thomas, half of the fun is in that inherent difficulty.

“You have more impact on the message, and less impact on resource or material or environment,” she says. “That’s a brilliant challenge for a designer.” ■

Alex Harrell is a multidisciplinary designer and writer based in Chicago. She is passionate about exploring and expanding the ever-growing relationship between digital media and the written word. www.axharrell.com