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Interview with Jane Pellicciotto, Allegro Design, 2011 (audio)

Jane Pellicciotto

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UNST 421 – Doc Sust Prac
Mar 8, 2011

INTERVIEWEE: JANE PELLICCIOTTO

Interviewer: Nigel Peltier

Date: March 7, 2011

Location of Interview: [redacted]

Research Assistant: Daniel Gray

Interview Series: Documenting Sustainable Practices in the Pacific Northwest

Recording Equipment: Marantz PMD661 Digital Field Recorder (128kbit mp3) with internal stereo microphone

00:00:10

Introduction, permission.

00:00:37

Q: How long have you lived in Portland?

A: 10 years.

00:00:48

Q: Why did you come to Portland?

A: To get away from hard-driving east coast attitudes, and to be closer to nature.

00:01:25

Q: Did PDX meet your expectations?

A: There are cultural differences; the food scene.

00:01:57

Q: Where were you educated after high school?

A: Bloomington, Indiana, and at the University of Maryland; degree in Advertising Design.

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Q: How did you transition to your professional life?

A: Slid right into it, working in a publishing department.

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Q: You were involved in the same business?

A: Yes.

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Q: How do you define sustainability?

A: The traditional (OCF) definition; some purists don't like including the economy.

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A: From Wikipedia: "the ability to endure;" seamless between personal and work life.

00:05:29

A: Ability to adapt; “enoughness;” surrounding self with functional, beautiful things.

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A: I don’t like the word “sustainability.”

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Q: How does the economic component play a part?

A: 2 ways: corporations feel pressure to make sustainable products, but want to balance between economy and sustainability.

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A: I try to get clients to think about sustainability in the context of efficiency.

00:09:51

A: There’s not much you can do with an annual report.

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A: If you say “sustainability,” companies think they have to spend more. Just say what is necessary.

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A: If a corporation has a sustainability mission statement, they don't want to address key questions. Is the report getting to the right people?

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A: If you can send fewer pages to fewer people (education, ideas, branding), smaller amounts can have bigger impact: win-win-win!

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Q: If you do your job, it can lead to less waste?

A: That's one way designers can do sustainable work.

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A: Altruism doesn't really work. Have to sell sustainability to clients in a different way.

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Q: How much compromise does there have to be?

A: Probably, for those not doing high-level work, it can be frustrating trying to do sustainable work.

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A: Take small steps. You can't be green out of the gate; it doesn't work to do one-off projects.

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A: Faith and trust: revisit a project year after year.

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A: Designers' Accord: the agreement to do sustainable work, have discussions, and see where it goes.

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Q: Are your goals dependent upon what you can accomplish with a client?

A: Example: speaker Christopher Simmons: we look to high-level people doing high-level work, but the small things matter, too.

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A: I don't keep paper swatch books without a high amount of recycled paper. Choice doesn't negatively affect clients.

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Q: Clients have a negative stigma attached to sustainability?

A: It's less strong than that. Design is a limiting word. People think: surface decoration.

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A: Clients have a sense of urgency, and when you ask questions they sense they are important. If you talk sustainable printing, etc, clients think it will cost more, but it really doesn't.

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A: Most designers aren't content being surface-level decorators.

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Q: What is it exactly that you do?

A: Wasting time on the internet like everyone else, putting out fires, worrying about finding the next client, and juggling 3-8 projects. A lot of unpaid ventures: blog posts, personal projects, such as tracking dollars spent on local produce. A self-publishing project; it's scattered but rich.

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Q: How do you select clients?

A: 2 things: client base that fits the sustainability model (example: working with the US Fish and Wildlife Department for 13 years, though bureaucracy makes sustainable goals difficult despite their mission statement), and companies that are sustainable despite not being sustainability related.

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A: I will turn work down. Clients need a positive message. Example: the first LEED Platinum building at OHSU.

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Q: Are you an outlier in your field?

A: I'm afraid not! Designers are a dime-a-dozen. Many designers are eager and interested in doing work that matters and shapes action in a positive way. Designers shape messages in a way that matters.

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Q: What influence do designers have on industry?

A: A big one. Speakers at Compost Modern are doing that kind of work. Designers have to know the language of business. I do marketing and communications, not product development.

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A: Puma example: designers have become integral partners. Every piece of clothing from overseas goes in a plastic container. A designer asked, "What if you folded that shirt one more time?" Saved Puma millions of dollars on plastic, and there is less going into a landfill. Designers have to be there at the start, not at the end.

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Q: How much say do outsiders have?

A: What I see is a lot of designers say, "Screw it, I'm gonna do my own thing." Example: female designer who created Project H, looking for problems that need a solution. The Hippo-roller: a plastic barrel with a handle for hauling water. She saw flaws with it and redesigned it. It's easier to haul water now, so people can spend more time going to school.

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A: The cool thing is designers are taking matters into their own hands. Designers have to invite themselves.

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Q: What are your proudest achievements?

A: My proudest achievements are not from doing sustainable work. They come from having clients that are happy with the final product. Companies don't often have an exact goal, so you don't know how effective your work is for them. Parks and Recreation example: client sent a thank-you note, but I don't know how effective the project was to the end reader.

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Q: Is interaction with business hard to pinpoint?

A: It's small things, like life. Volunteer work at the Portland Farmers Market: they appreciate the things I do.

00:43:09

Q: How can you implement sustainability in design? How long did you have the mindset to implement sustainable goals?

A: I'm no pioneer, but I've always run business this way. It's not that unusual. I have an effort or interest in reproducing projects as responsibly as possible.

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A: Establish relationships with vendors: the sooner the better. I prefer to ask the printer: how do I waste the least paper? I'm willing to make adjustments.

00:46:18

A: The Living Principles: www.livingprinciples.org.

00:46:47

A: Sustainable design comes from corporations you wouldn't think are associated with sustainability. Design solutions that look good and reduce waste, attention to how things are produced and what with, and "do-gooder" organizations.

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Q: Are there any stand-out companies?

A: I can't say for clients, but the Portland Farmers Market: it's a venue for local farmers and the inherent content is sustainable. And they set specific goals to reach, such as the Evergreen recycling program regarding the trash generated at the Farmers Market: a 3 year goal. They were inspired by a California organization. They did it right: collaboration, combining resources. Bio-degradable containers for hot food, for example. They had goals beyond the sustainability statement. It would be more impressive for a big company, but the challenges are the same.

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Q: How important is collaboration?

A: The most often referenced element. At the Shift event nearly every speaker mentioned collaboration. In systems, one might play a small part, but every level matters. I regularly work with writers and marketers.

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Q: What are some challenges in the context of being sustainable?

A: "Oh, God! There comes that sustainable designer!" It has more to do with being effective, and being aware that readers and end users are more cynical, more sophisticated in message consumption. Possibilities are squandered by bureaucracy and design-by-committee.

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A: You can capture someone's attention by saying a lot of the wrong things or a little of the right things. Working with printers that have sustainable practices, promoting them. Lacking words to convince clients to be more effective with less. The communication burden is on designers.

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Q: Are things going in a positive direction?

A: It's a little like visiting family for the holidays: you know the same things happen over and over. But, sustainability is a big part of the discussion now. The American Marketing Association is putting out stuff with sustainability in the title.

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A: You have to be able to sell sustainability. There's resistance from the uncommitted. You can't sell sustainability with "green." It doesn't sell. Have sustainable businesses, and let people discover them.

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A: Seventh Generation vs. Method: Method looks cool and sells anywhere. Seventh Generation has leaves all over it. There is a green stigma, and we need people onboard who might reject green brands.

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Q: It's a stereotype?

A: It's passé.

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Q: Is there an oversimplification of the message? Why does it hurt?

A: According to cultural anthropology speakers, altruistic "save the planet" just doesn't work. Climate change is intangible. People are motivated by choices other people make. Number one: it looks cool, people want it. Example, American Apparel: save the planet hemp clothing won't sell as well.

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Q: Is there anything else?

A: I don't think so. It's a complicated subject. There are more questions than answers. The discussion of sustainability is being widened to include social aspects. Environment, culture, society: the framework branches out. Designers ask questions around these.

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A: Sustainability is a given. I want to make these functional and efficient. I respect people's intelligence.

01:09:57

Q: Is there power in brief messages?

A: It's tempting to use the stock photo of a hand holding a seedling; but it's trite. About websites: it's tempting to assume online is more sustainable than printing, but—and this is coming from paper companies so take it with a grain of salt—paper companies are measuring the CO2 footprint of electronic devices. There are references comparing the difference between a printed report vs. putting it online. Tools are available to measure this.

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A: Remember: who is this for? It would be irresponsible to just say, "Put it on the web." For a retiree community, online publication loses good will. Balance negative impacts and consider the audience. Designing responsibly doesn't mean just don't waste resources.

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Q: Companies have a unique set of needs?

A: Getting away from sustainability, designers have always needed to consider waste and efficiency. As a designer I have to consider these things.

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A: I use the example of my grandfather: the model of sustainability out of necessity, not fashion. He lived in the Great Depression and had seven kids. He grew vegetables in his garden, made toys for the needy kids in the neighborhood, made furniture.

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A: This generation is bringing this back. The goals of sustainability are not novel, they just got lost along the way.

01:18:10

Q: Is the sustainability movement a result of the industrial revolution?

A: It's a backlash against the excesses of the 70s, 80s, 90s. We're growing more conscious as citizens, but we're behind schedule.

01:19:47

End.