

# SEEN

*Anna Gerber gets her hands dirty down at Commonwork, a farming community seeking to raise eco awareness, plus, Pick of the Month*

## Design of the World

Designers have a responsibility to be environmentally-aware and to instigate change in the wider world, says Anna Gerber

1-6. Our reviewer took 200 graphic design students along to [Commonwork](#), a farming community that seeks to raise environmental awareness. The Kent-based farm encourages visitors to make bread (shown, 11) and bricks (1&6) and dye wool in order to foster a hands-on approach to self-sufficiency and a direct understanding of the shaping of physical materials. The students' brief began with the statement: "We often take our environment – where things originate, where they

will end up, how things are made – for granted. It is all too rare that, as designers, we ask ourselves how things are made". Anna Gerber visited with Sarah Temple, director of the Personal and Professional Development programme at the [London College of](#)

[Communication](#) and fellow tutors Jackie Blake, Sian Cook, David Palazon, Catherine Smith and Rebecca Wright.

Photography by Anna Gerber (1-4) and Sarah Temple (5&6)

Last September, I spent some time on an environmentally progressive kibbutz in the Arava Valley in Southern Israel. Founded in 1983, [Kibbutz Lotan](#) is dedicated to raising awareness about environmental sustainability and has one of the most impressive alternative building programmes in the region. There are 75 permanent adult members (and a further 50 children), each living, eating, building, talking, dancing and following their common green dream together. Lying at the heart of the kibbutz is what they call the Centre for Creative Ecology, which consists of an alternative building programme, a permaculture farm and an educational programme, The Green Apprenticeship Ecovillage Permaculture Design Course.

Soaking up the dry Negev desert heat, I spent a day learning about the centre's progressive programmes,

getting to grips with ideas of sustainability and community planning, looking at renewable resources in building projects (particularly in harsh desert conditions), understanding recycling in terms of re-using as much as recycling, seeing – and smelling – the fully functional composting toilet and learning to make bricks with sand, straw and local mud.

It was while making bricks that I had a sort of epiphany. Just weeks earlier, I had finished two-plus years of working with Anja Lutz on our book, [Influences: A Lexicon of Contemporary Graphic Design](#), which looks at what motivates graphic design(ers). I was especially preoccupied with the concept that our ideas, our inspirations, have the potential to come from everything and everywhere. So, with mud-caked hands, as I set a finished brick out in

the sun to dry, it struck me that the graphic design process is not that much different: we source the appropriate materials to work with, we find the "right" combination of materials, things and ideas and most importantly, ensure that our outcome is something that works, that has a functionality.

I came back to London, blissed out, wanting to share this experience with my students. And several weeks ago, I did just that. With the help and support of Sarah Temple, director of the Personal and Professional Development programme at the [London College of Communication](#), I set off with five enthusiastic tutors and two hundred eager (and not so eager) BA Graphic Design students to [Commonwork](#), a farming community, established in 1976, on a 500 acre estate in Kent.

As the coach left the urban ►



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Creative Review  
April 2007

More information on the farm can be found at [www.commonwork.org](http://www.commonwork.org), while more details on the kibbutz Gerber attended are at [www.kibbutzlotan.com](http://www.kibbutzlotan.com). LCC will be staging a major educational event on the subject of sustainability some time in 2008.

7-12. The mud certainly didn't deter the creative talents of the students. By learning how to make bricks (and then, ultimately, walls) it was hoped that they gained an insight into the role of "functionality" in designing for the real world. Photography: Anna Gerber

◀ sprawl of Elephant and Castle and moved into the countryside, the ride was noisy with twentysomething student murmurings, swinging wildly from cynical asides along the lines of "What's the point of this?" to enthusiastic quips like, "God knows what this'll be like, but it sounds cool". As we pulled into Commonwork, a community seeking to raise environmental awareness, with a working dairy farm and handmade brick operation, the implications of instigating a trip where two hundred design students would learn to make bricks, bake bread, use natural materials such as onion skin to dye wool and undertake a tour of the dairy farm (eg see hundreds of cows getting milked), began to fully sink in.

The student's brief began with: "We often take our environment – where things originate, where they will end up, how things are made – for

granted. It is all too rare that, as designers, we ask ourselves how things are made", a statement which quickly became a real-life prompt as students were handed organic grain and asked to grind it down into flour with a wooden hand operated grain mill. The tutor demonstrating the process, emphasised how every loaf would end up being completely different, how the recipe is important but not set in stone.

She then showed students how to knead dough and guided them in deciding on whether or not they needed to add more water, flour, etc. While many of the European students said they had made bread before, they also said it felt good to be using their hands again. One after the other said things like, "I didn't realise this was so easy, I'm going to start doing this at home".

Only one of the students,

however, claimed prior experience when we moved onto making bricks. During the brick making workshop, many students remarked that the process of working with the clay mixture was very similar to kneading dough. One discussion, in particular, which took place outside the workshop, struck me as fascinating and was an early sign that they were beginning to make associations between their own work and the work they were undertaking here.

Once the students had finished making their bricks, they were given bricks that had been made earlier and were then asked to make walls, based on intricate brick patterns. The patterns were relatively difficult to follow and the students quickly began expressing concerns about whether their wall "would work", whether it was "stable enough", whether it could "hold anything up". It became evident

that, for them, the notion that what they were working on had to serve a purpose and that what they were doing didn't exist without a functional outcome.

Returning to the idea that one of the trip's aims was to show students the importance of "where things come from", I was reminded as I stood watching that small group of students build their wall, of Commonwork's guiding principle: "Our vision is of a fairer world, in which people collaborate with each other and with nature everywhere, recognising that all are interconnected." It dawned on me, as we gathered our things, picking straw from our jumpers at the end of the second day, that now more than ever, we as graphic designers are in a position to change the way things are, that global environmental issues can and need to be addressed through design and that as designers

we have a responsibility (be it social, ethical etc.) to fulfil that role.

This in turn, led me to think of something Bruce Mau once said: that designers should be less interested in the world of design, and instead more interested in the design of the world. Heading back to Elephant and Castle, Mau's words to the fore, I had the distinct feeling that the students were taking home more than just dirty wellies, that they had gained some awareness beyond themselves, and maybe even some sense of responsibility – either that or all that country air had finally gotten to me. ☺

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