



**DESIGNED  
FOR THE  
FUTURE**

**80 PRACTICAL  
IDEAS FOR  
A SUSTAINABLE  
WORLD**

Jared Green

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**WE CAN'T  
GIVE UP YET.**

## INTRODUCTION:

### WHAT GIVES YOU HOPE FOR THE FUTURE?

We can't give in to fatalism, or even pessimism, just yet. While we face incredible challenges—with climate change, biodiversity loss, and rising economic inequality at the top of the list—there are glimpses of a more positive, sustainable future here today. In this book, you'll find buildings, landscapes, plans, and works of art—contemporary and historic, but all real—that point the way forward.

I asked each contributor to this book the same question: What gives you hope that a sustainable future is possible? What shows the way forward? If possible, please talk about a project. And please don't talk about anything that you've been involved in.

Contributors were selected in a somewhat random fashion. I knew some people and had heard of others, while still others were recommended to me by someone I interviewed. There are architects, landscape architects, urban planners, academics, nonprofit leaders, policymakers, and artists, and some people who cross multiple categories or are beyond these. The contributors come from all over the world, but most are here in the United States. This book

represents the collective wisdom of a hive mind, a meeting of so many disciplines. All are deeply committed to creating a more positive future.

Nearly everyone had an answer to the question. Out of more than eighty people I spoke to, only two said, "I don't have much hope for the future." The rest seemed stirred by the challenge. I saw a few people's eyes light up, intrigued by my challenge. Some had answers at the tips of their tongues, as if they had been just been thinking about this. Others asked for time to think, checking their assumptions and beliefs, searching for the right example. While I prompted sometimes, I didn't tell people what others were talking about, so no one was influenced by anyone else.

Almost all contributors were interviewed in person or over the phone. My goal was to keep the tone light and conversational. This is because I fear "design speak." This language, like any other inside jargon, is alienating, elitist, and completely inaccessible to the public. This book is, I hope, part of the antidote to that, too, as it shows a whole

range of designers and other professionals who communicate beautifully, in easy to understand terms, with passion. They really connect. So it turns out that my fear was largely unfounded; all the contributors totally got it. That gives me hope for the future because without the ability to communicate with everyone, we have no chance.

Even though all the answers are unique, the ideas and projects share common goals. They fall into loose groups. One group shows that our best hope is in the most cutting-edge technologies: progress toward sustainability means throwing out the old and coming up with new, revolutionary approaches that can undo our broken systems. In contrast, another group shows that what's old—and what has survived and adapted itself to change over many decades—is what's sustainable. The idea is that we don't make them like we used to.

And then other answers tell the story of the social, or community, side of sustainability, expressing the idea that new technologies are all well and good, but if a community doesn't feel a sense of ownership over a project and can't maintain it far into the future, then what good is it? Another side of this is that a sustainable project is one that reinvests in its surrounding community. These projects actively bolster a community's ability to sustain itself.

One set of projects perhaps speak most powerfully to me: these projects teach us—through innovative design and natural beauty—that we are all part of the Earth. They harness nature or mimic its forms.

In doing so, they reconnect us to the land, water, air, quietly letting us know that our ultimate sustainability, our survival, is dependent on a much more complex system. And so many fascinating ideas fall into many of these groups, accomplishing so much at once. Together, they form a much-needed conversation about how to reach a sustainable future.

Some takeaways that leaped out at me (as you read, you may see others):

- We can end our dependence on fossil fuels by shifting to renewable energy. Energy from the sun provides more than we will ever need.
- The world is becoming increasingly urban, and that's not a bad thing. Dense, walkable communities are the most energy-efficient and low-carbon environments we have. But to live in dense communities, people need beautiful streets, parks, waterfronts, and so forth.
- Communities know best what they need and what they can handle. If communities feel empowered, they can solve many of their own problems and plot out their own paths to future sustainability.
- Reinvest in old places, buildings, and traditions; imbue them with new energy.
- Go local for skills and resources. Use what you have, as that will form a language that resonates with the community.

- Use new technologies to reduce energy and water use. Scale up these technologies into broader systems that work at the neighborhood or district level. Make these systems cheaper than the wasteful status quo.
- Invest in people by creating new skills. Who will design and build the most cutting-edge buildings and infrastructure of the future?
- Reuse what you have, waste nothing.
- Create access to nature to improve our health and well-being and teach us to rely on a greater natural system.
- Design with nature. Or, even better, design like nature and mimic the natural forms most efficient at conserving resources.
- Cities sit within metro areas and regions. Go big: consider the metro and regional scale. Sustainability is about creating affordable opportunities in housing, employment, and transportation for regions.
- Bureaucracies, which set policies that affect our health and environment, can evolve and become smarter. Sustainable policies create broader impacts beyond one project.
- Real projects show the way forward. By their very existence, they demonstrate what's possible. Their very success is their reality. And that means they can be replicated, and then become the norm, if we are smart.

And reading through all the answers, I thought again that hope is perhaps the most valuable currency we have, as it motivates all our actions—from creating a world-changing new technology to preserving a beloved old building or town square to protecting a threatened community or ecosystem. We have the answers. We are both the cause of our problems and the solution to them.

As you explore the answers, think about what you would say if someone asked you these questions. Or think about someone you'd like to ask. I bet the answer that you get will be unexpected.

While there is certainly cause for alarm, it's not all bad news. As the science fiction writer William Gibson said, "The future is already here, but it's just not evenly distributed." While he was perhaps thinking of some sort of technodystopia, this could also mean a more sustainable future is on the way. This book offers a glimpse into that more positive future, if we take the time to reconnect with what works today.

# THE IDEAS

## ABOMEY

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

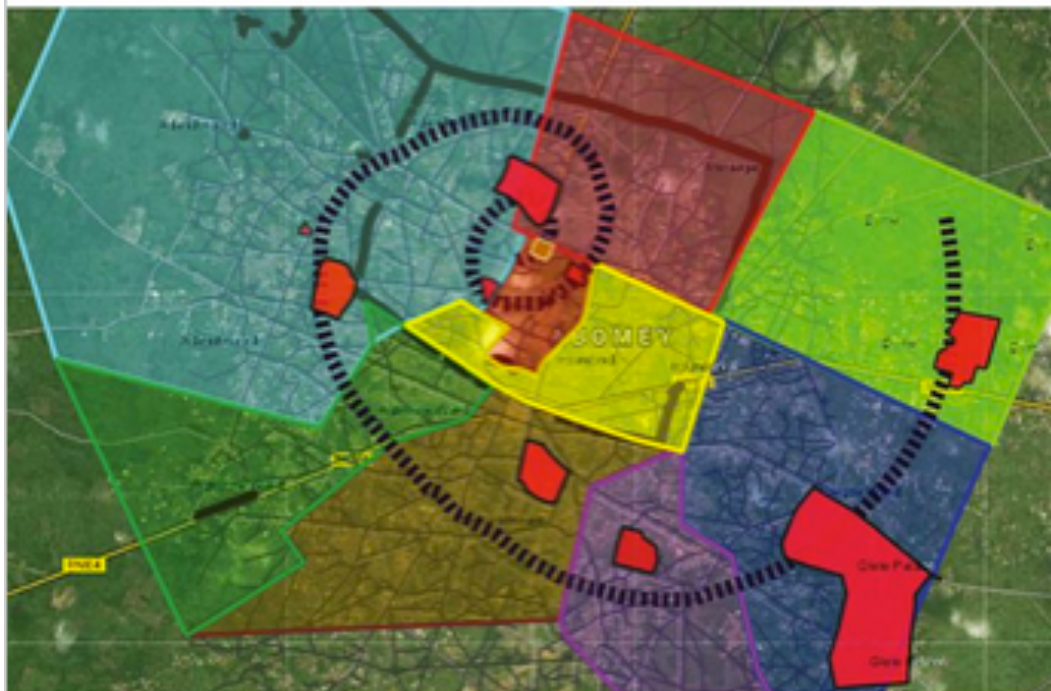
### Plan for obsolescence, not just expansion.

Abomey is the capital of the historical West African Kingdom of Dahomey (Republic of Benin). This central plan, walled city was created in the reign of King Agaja (1718–1740 CE). The main palace is in the center, with later palaces, temples, and administrative structures built in a spiral radiating out from the center. This spiral was in essence preplanned, as early planners expected that each successive ruler would take over new land as the city expanded. Planned destruction was key to this process. Today, architects and planners rarely think creatively of obsolescence as part of the design process.

The value placed on earthen architecture in Dahomey is also important. This material is wonderfully malleable—not only in terms of its technical and design features but also in how it enables social change. Sections of earthen buildings are easily removed and rebuilt as family and other needs change. In Dahomey, when the senior man in a family dies, the compound may be abandoned. While this now-abandoned site looks ragged and raw, it is in essence fermenting, and, at some point, maybe two generations later, the family will come together and someone else will rebuild here. The structure and family are in a sense reborn.

Dahomey shows the imperative of strategic planning for obsolescence and the use of materials that can readily be rebuilt. Today in cities we too often push those least able to fight back out of their neighborhoods so new structures can be erected. If one planned for obsolescence as a key part of the design process, much would be gained. Using more malleable materials would enable us to adapt our cities more easily. Shrinkage or growth could be made more consistent with individual and community needs.

Suzanne Preston Blier is an art historian who serves as the Allen Whitehill Clowes Professor of Fine Arts and professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University.



Plan of Abomey, Capital of the Dahomey Kingdom (Republic of Benin), Africa, 1718–1740 CE