

Beyond the Triple Bottom Line

Designing for the Triple Top Line

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As the concept of sustainability takes root in corporate culture, many business leaders today are beginning to measure performance against the triple bottom line. This triad of concerns—economic growth, environmental protection and social equity—was once considered an impractical, blue-sky ethic. Yet today it has begun to define both long-term strategy and everyday practice for leading manufacturing corporations all over the world.

Developed by the sustainable business theorist John Elkington, the triple bottom line has given corporations a useful tool for balancing economic goals with a desire to “do better by the environment.” Unfortunately, in ways we’re sure Elkington did not intend, many companies’ application of the concept has yielded strategies, such as resource efficiency and waste management, that meet the triple bottom line by minimizing environmental or social liabilities.

These are important first steps toward identifying problems, but ultimately they are strategies for managing negative effects.

Why lament our creations? Why not celebrate the things we make?

One might begin with a new definition of product quality. From our perspective, quality is embodied in designs that allow industry to enhance the well being of nature and culture while generating economic value.

Designers aiming for this level of quality

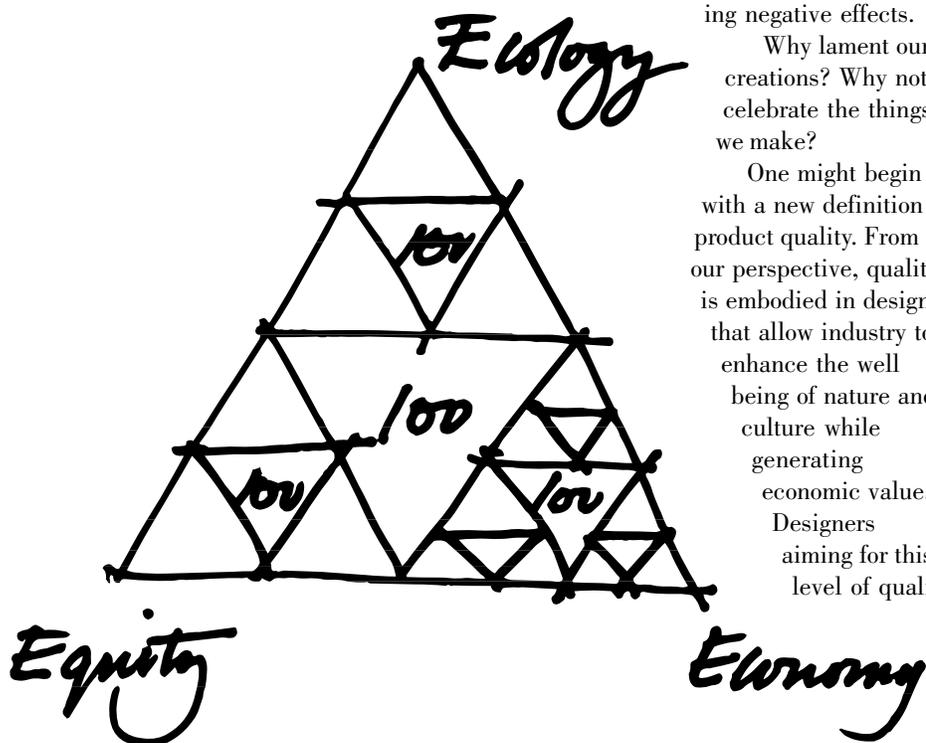
follow the laws of nature to create products, processes and facilities so ecologically intelligent they leave vital, delightful footprints rather than waste management headaches. In these new human systems, materials become food for the soil or flow back to industry forever.

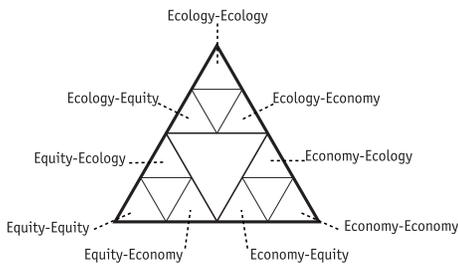
Pursuing positive aspirations at every level of commerce anchors intelligent design deep within corporate business strategy. And when good design drives the business agenda, the path toward sustainability turns from end-of-pipe solutions to creating value with innovative product design—a shift from the triple bottom line to the triple top line. If one approaches the design process asking, right from the start, “How can I grow prosperity, celebrate my community, and enhance the health of all species?” the results are likely to be far more positive and enriching than measuring performance against a bottom line standard.

Understanding Value with the Fractal Triangle

In our work with corporate clients such as Ford Motor Company, Nike, Herman Miller and BASF we have found that a visual tool, a fractal triangle, helps us apply triple top line thinking throughout the design process. Typically, meeting the triple bottom line is seen as a balancing act, a series of compromises between competing interests played out in product and process design. The key insights offered by the fractal triangle turn this notion on its head: Intelligent design, rather than balancing economy, ecology and equity can employ their dynamic interplay to create business opportunities and maximize value in each of the three broad areas.

Representing the ecology of human concerns, the fractal triangle shows how ecology, economy and equity anchor a spectrum of value, and how, at any level of scrutiny, each design decision has an impact on all three. As we plan a product or system, we move around the fractal inquiry-





ing how a new design can generate value in each category.

In the pure Economy sector, we might ask “Can I make my product at a profit?” As we see it, the goal of an effective company is to stay in business as it transforms. The Equity sector raises social questions: “Are we finding ways to honor all stakeholders, regardless of race, sex, nationality or religion?” Moving to the Ecology corner, the emphasis shifts to imagining ways in which humans can be “tools for nature.” As we move around the triangle, questions expressing a complex interaction of concerns arise at the intersections of Ecology, Economy and Equity.

Triple top line thinkers, rather than trying to balance these values, discover opportunities in honoring the needs of all three. In an infinitely interconnected

world, they see rich relationships rather than inherent conflicts. Their goal: to maximize value in all areas of the triangle through intelligent design. When designing a manufacturing facility, for example, they would ask: How can this project restore more landscape and purify more water? How much social interaction and joy can I create? What about safety and health? How much prosperity can I grow?

New Standards of Quality

Questions such as these have already begun to introduce a new standard of quality, adding ecological intelligence, social justice, and the celebration of creativity to the typical design criteria of cost, performance, and aesthetics. They allow us to remake the way we make things. Today.

Along with our business partners, we are building enormously productive factories that inspire their inhabitants with sunlit spaces, fresh air, copious views of the outdoors and cultural delights. We are creating infinitely recyclable textiles that create beneficial long-term relationships between producers and customers. Fabrics that are safe to manufacture, offer pleasure as garments, and become sources of nourishment for our gardens when they wear out.

Triple top line thinkers, rather than trying to balance these values [economy, ecology, and equity], discover opportunities in honoring the needs of all three. In an infinitely interconnected world, they see rich relationships rather than inherent conflicts. Their goal: to maximize value in all areas of the triangle through intelligent design.

When products and services such as these are the norm, when design for the triple top line is applied at every level of industry, productivity and profits will no longer be at odds with the concerns of the commons. Instead, we will be living in a world in which both nature and commerce can thrive and grow. ▲