

## The Best of the Green Communicators What Makes Them Great? Can You Ever Catch Up?

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

**T**his is the third of my *Marketer* columns on green marketing, where I alert designers, builders, and their marketing people to the danger of commoditizing sustainable services. Some do this by citing the number of LEED-accredited people on their staff as if that equates to effectiveness. They should instead, I argue, encourage and support thoughtful, passionate green leaders with a sense of the urgency of their mission.

Knowing that no one watches for new information and insights about this industry more closely than design magazine editors, I sent a few this question: What design professional has done a phenomenal job of communicating the benefit of a green approach—and of convincing others to adopt sustainability?

Formidable **Susan Szenasy**, who has successfully and way ahead of anyone else used *Metropolis* as her bully pulpit for sustainability, answered me instantly: “Frankly, none of them. Either they’re too heavy handed or don’t know how to talk about it, aside from the obvious few.”

Szenasy’s “obvious few” list starts with architect William McDonough, whom *Time* long ago dubbed “Hero for the Planet.” He has been deified so much, there’s no need to give you more, except to direct you to the eloquent [www.mcdonough.com](http://www.mcdonough.com). The site opens with this quote: “I believe we can accomplish great and profitable things within a new conceptual framework—one that values our legacy, honors diversity, and feeds ecosystems and societies...”

“What design professional has done a phenomenal job of communicating the benefit of a green approach—and of convincing others to adopt sustainability?”

This column profiles four of the best to talk compellingly about sustainability: three individuals and one firm. At the top is **Bob Berkebile, FAIA**, the ‘B’ of BNIM Architects in Kansas City. Called “our Yoda” by one editor, Bob has been the voice and face of the sustainability movement since the ’70s.

BNIM just received the American Institute of Architects’ Firm of the Year honors. This acclaim rises from its mission, well stated on its LinkedIn entry: “BNIM’s mission is to improve the quality of life for the owner, user, and surrounding community through a balance of social, economic, and environmental concerns.” (Hard to miss the triple bottom-line reference: people/profit/planet.)

Bob says that BNIM’s collective ear is tuned both to the people who purchase design services and also those who benefit from them. He repeatedly tells this story: After the Kansas City Hyatt tragedy (an earlier version of his firm was the architect, though the fault for the fatal collapse of the skywalks was subsequently assigned to the engineers), he struggled for three years about why it was important to be an architect.

He found his answers from “very smart people” at the periphery of architecture: scientists, researchers, and sociologists among them. “The paradigm and the profession were obsolete,” he concluded, but he liked the “collaborative dialogue of discovery.” He realized that he could bring his intelligence and training to the table, but others brought their own language, images, and solutions. Working together, he reasoned, would make the result “brilliant.” This connection and approach has made him a riveting speaker, writer, facilitator, and designer.

A founding member of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and founding chairman of the AIA’s Committee on the Environment, Bob is on the road all the time, working and also proselytizing about sustainability. “I won’t say we are successful in every case,” he admits, but case studies from the post-tornado resuscitation of Greensburg, KS, and from BNIM’s work along

the Mississippi and now Springfield, MA, show that “open conversations lead to bold decisions” about water, energy, and other natural resources.

“What are you bringing to the conversation?” is his constant question. Sell and don’t listen, he cautions, and you’ll never get to the next level. He has used his Heinz Award to visit the most sustainable communities around the world. “Don’t underestimate the ability of people to change,” he observes. “Still, we’re definitely on a critical marathon without a lot of time to make the amount of change required.”

**Jean Carroon, FAIA, LEED**, is another member of my pantheon of green communicators. A leader in the preservation practice at Boston-based Goody Clancy, architects and planners, she is low key and persistent. Jean has married sustainability and preservation, neglected in the initial green movement. Her restoration work, which includes H.H. Richardson’s great Trinity Church in Boston; her knowledge of building technology; and her constant presentations about the value of conjoining sustainability and preservation all contributed to her being appointed to Boston Mayor Menino’s Green Building Task Force and becoming an advisor to Boston’s Green Building Resource Center.

My point is that you inevitably become a leader when you make up your mind to advocate what matters to you—and then set out. On a national level, for instance, Jean became a visible member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Sustainability Coalition. In fact, in 2008 she made the Trust’s often-quoted case for greening the Capitol Complex before the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration.

In 2010, Wiley published *Sustainable Preservation: Greening Existing Buildings*, which remarkably already has gone into its second printing. Jean had tracked about 200 projects she might profile, a beneficial habit. The more she researched, the more urgently she felt that “we are in big trouble environmentally... This knowledge motivates me to keep pushing Goody Clancy’s practice, keep talking, keep writing, keep trying to do as much as I can to educate, alarm, and activate others.”

With hindsight, although the time spent on the book was invaluable to her, producing it wasn’t quick enough for Jean, who is always on the stump. Still, “If the book helps to change any policies, or to awaken and impassion people to the opportunities and necessity of existing buildings, then I am more than happy to have done it.”

**Jerry Yudelson, P.E.** (a former *Marketer* Contributing Editor), is a cinch to include as the third communicator. He is working on his 13th book, *The World’s Greenest Buildings: Promise vs. Performance in Sustainable Design*, due out September 2012. His Web site, GreenBuildConsult.com, makes the point that “we have proven the business case for green buildings,” and Jerry has.

I’m guessing that Jerry has had the same questions as the rest of us. For instance, he wondered, How do you market green services? So he wrote *Marketing Green Building Services: Strategies for Success*. Is Europe so far ahead? Can you “green” retail development? Where is urban water in this discussion? And so he set out to learn about the topic—or perhaps he queried or was approached by organizations that needed to get in the green game—and then wrote yet another book.



Bob Berkebile, FAIA, BNIM Architects



Jean Carroon, FAIA, LEED, Goody Clancy



Jerry Yudelson, P.E., Yudelson Associates



*Perkins+Will's Sustainable Leadership Plan for 2011–2015*

It's worth visiting the site for the number of ways this one peripatetic, determined engineer has promoted green design and construction and established himself as the expert consultant in the field. The articles are a primer by themselves and links to deeper resources.

The fourth name on this list is the organization widely described as the design firm that communicates best about sustainability: **Perkins+Will**. The magnitude of its engagement is matched only by its selfless sharing of research, worksheets, and documents.

P+W is the firm with the largest number of LEED-accredited people, but that's not the point. Phil Harrison's green tribe sincerely wants to save the planet, realizes that it can't do it alone, and doesn't want to be the only design firm at the finish line.

**"Can you or your firm get to the same leadership status as these outstanding green communicators?"**

Previously, P+W developed and then posted a detailed process to reach the stringent Architecture 2030 goals at [www.2030e2.perkinswill.com](http://www.2030e2.perkinswill.com). Then it posted "The Precautionary List" of toxic building materials, because "It is our belief that products that are harmful to humans, animals, and the environment should not be used in our projects." Find [www.transparency.perkinswill.com](http://www.transparency.perkinswill.com) for more.

Now its Web site has published P+W's "Sustainable Leadership Plan 2011–2015," where the firm identifies "broader goals" for the next five years to "make it a global leader in sustainable design." Yet again, P+W doesn't keep the approach to itself. Your firm could jump right into the pond as well; just go to [www.perkinswill.com](http://www.perkinswill.com) publications and follow the instructions.

"Goal 1. Applied Research," for instance, shows internal, regional, and global goals. It will work with a university, the Clinton Climate Initiative, and the World Business Council on Sustainable Development. Why? "By engaging... we can disseminate our knowledge more widely and advocate for sustainable design issues...linked with our advocacy and outreach efforts."

Sure, it helps to have hundreds of employees and a sustainability war chest. But that doesn't characterize Bob Berkebile, Jean Carroon, or Jerry Yudelson, who all just got up one morning and set forth to argue their case, develop their own network, bring opportunities to their firms, and, most to the point, help save the planet by convincing others to do likewise.

Can you or your firm get to the same leadership status as these outstanding "green communicators"? The Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* had to "run faster and faster just in order to keep still where she is." But you are lucky because you have generous, outspoken role models, and there is no longer any disadvantage to being a first-mover. So go redesign your people, your firm, your community, your profession, your government. It's what America is all about.

*Note: Editors Rob Cassidy of Building Design + Construction, Jane Kolleeny of GreenSource, Bradford McKee of Landscape Architect, William Menking of Architects Newspaper, Susan Szenasy of Metropolis, and my public relations colleague Arthur Young, former managing editor of Green Building News, all prompted me. My deep-green thanks to them. ■*

## About the Author



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