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[Partners](#)

[Supporters](#)

[Guestbook](#)

[Our History](#)

[What People Say](#)

[Credits & Thanks](#)

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GMS in Progress

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Works in Progress: the Green Map System

by Wendy E. Brawer, Director

I started combing New York for signs of potential sustainability back in 1990. I had decided to focus my energy on something important. Rome was burning, I realized, and I was fiddling around, focused on self-expression. My obsolete art-and-design toolbox needed some new, ecological capacities:

- Transforming products into services to meet needs, not create wants
- Drawing inspiration from natural systems
- Looking at many cultures for the tools of ecological living
- Renewing everything under the sun
- Being efficient, appropriate, equitable and local

I kept wondering how I could acquire these capacities, and how lessons learned in Tokyo, Seattle and Detroit could shape my approach. Fortunately, I was not alone. Great teachers and fellow sojourners helped me understand that Design = Power and that we can collaborate and celebrate as we work for our most important client, the common future.

My toolbox wasn't full by any means, but the support of these colleagues, plus the basic pulsing energy level of New York, spurred me into action. Besides, I like learning on the job.

Ever intrepid, I explored all five boroughs. I found out about wonderful greening initiatives, inspiring projects and restoration/conservation efforts right in our own city. I started to develop a green-eyed view of New York, and decided to create something to help more folks see it that way. English-speaker or non-English-speaker, oldtimer or newcomer, visitor or resident -- anybody should be able to discover (and get involved in) all the good green places and projects in NYC. In mulling over the most resource-efficient, universally accessible way of going about it, I hit upon the idea of a Green Map.

As 1992 began, lots of people encouraged our outfit, Modern World Design, to bring this idea into tangible existence (check out our [history](#)). The first Green Apple Map charted 143 sites: community gardens, parks, greenmarkets, eco-centers, green businesses and buildings, transportation options, and toxic hot spots all over the city. Although it wasn't very big or colorful, our Green Apple Map seemed to help fulfill a real need. As users unfolded it, they discovered that there really was an environment here...a budding Green Apple with a tremendous diversity of local nature, from wildlife and beaches and places of outstanding beauty, plus eco-resources, cultural sites and other places that made our home unique.

We made a second Green Apple Map shortly thereafter, incorporating more color and lots more green sites suggested from all over town. This second edition traveled far and wide. Soon I was being asked to write and talk about the "Greening of New York" in lots of different venues. It was a novel idea out there -- New York has nature?! Lots of green activists in other cities figured that if New Yorkers could treasure their environment, they could at least do as much themselves. They wanted to make Green Maps of their own cities. Nearly every place has something really good going on, but

as in New York, many of the greening initiatives are small and unconnected, often almost lost in the cacophony of the city. We decided to band together and make Green Maps as a team.

Defining, designing and producing our own Green Maps was not going to be a quick and easy process, but we could expedite matters by developing a method of encouraging each other. We could chart the green sites in a connected way, so each Map would be easy to understand, no matter where it was made. Though the resulting Maps would be primarily designed to meet local needs, when viewed together they would teach an overall lesson in urban ecological stewardship that used the same visual vocabulary.

This idea was exciting. Although complex, a collaborative approach seemed feasible and fun. By early 1995, the Green Map System took off. Suddenly, there were people from around the world, mostly colleagues from the [O2 Global Network](#), ready to make Green Maps. This all happened at the moment when I was shown how the Internet could facilitate communication and discussion among us. With our website still just a gleam in my eye, I asked a thousand questions:

How could we make an adaptable framework to help everyone create Green Maps in a responsible, yet beautiful and engaging way?

- In what way could we make these Maps most accessible for all users and help transfer successful greening initiatives from city to city?
- Could we grow this collaboration in a information-rich, eco-systematic way, so that our actual Mapmaking experiences strengthen the System and become the guidance manual for the next Mapmaker?
- What is the best way to make the Green Map System freely accessible yet self-sustaining and able to support a staff to develop and run it?

It took months of thinking, talking, planning and designing to get the Green Map System going, with dozens of people helping shape it as it grew. We've now gotten some of the questions answered, but are way behind on several others, including the last big question on the list (we've tended to operate on the If You Build It, They Will Come principle). Nonetheless, a great deal has been accomplished: six cities have already published their Green Maps, designed with shared design icons but within individualized formats. Our website has links to all of these and to 40 more mapmaking groups from 15 countries who are using the System as an inspiration engine. All six inhabited continents are involved. We're expecting the first dozen locally produced Green Maps to be published this year, and look forward to sharing our green-eyed views of home with the world.

As the director of the whole Green Map System as well as the lead designer for the third edition of the [Green Apple Map](#) (created in collaboration with Metropolis magazine), I've got my hands full. I'm alternatively thrilled when I'm e-mailed about how the model map we created here is being reshaped for yet another town, and anxious about getting all the System elements up and running. Somehow, yes somehow, it will all happen...



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