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The Unsustainable Loop Of Sustainability

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The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.

Sustainability has been a fad word for decades. It has been overused and inter-mingled with other "green words" such as recyclable, eco-friendly, biodegradable, and so on. The unsustainable loop of sustainability refers to the current trend of marketing products as sustainable alternatives to the existing products but not being sustainable to begin with. This is powered by the emergence of the term greenwashing and its wide adoption. We look at the false perception of sustainability as an elite or luxury term by the masses and the reasons behind this perception. We target how we, as designers, can create interventions in this domain and bring about more sustainable solutions.

KEYWORDS: System Oriented Design, Sustainability, Perpetual Loop, Unsustainability, Greenwashing, Consumerism, End of Abundance, Speculation, Consumer Products, Corporate Sector, Product Design, Design Oriented Solutions, macro view, corporate ecosystems

RSD: Case Studies & Practice, Learning & Education, Society & Culture, Socioecological Design, Mapping & Modelling

Project description

In this project, we have mapped out the status quo, starting from extraction to production, to distribution, to consumption and ending with disposal. This is further mapped to the direct and indirect effects corresponding to each phase. An Indian perspective is also added to enrich the map further with how traditional living practices used to be more sustainable than the current scenario. We also see why this problem is in a perpetual wicked loop, with countries pushing for a consumerist outlook with more emphasis on increased GDP to boost the economy.
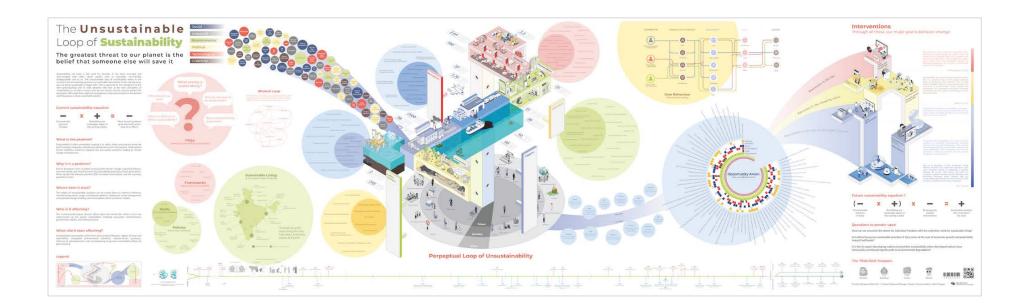
The theme of the map

Perpetual Loop of Unsustainability is inspired by the Penrose triangle. It represents a cyclic sequence of unsustainable practices that lead to adverse environmental, social, and economic consequences. While it may appear impossible to break this loop, it is, in fact, an illusion that can be addressed gradually through step-by-step improvements and transitions towards more sustainable approaches.

Questions presented

The project presented three unanswered questions:

- How can we reconcile the desire for individual freedom with the collective need for sustainable living?
- Is it ethical to pursue sustainable practices if they come at the cost of economic growth and potentially impact livelihoods?
- Is it fair to expect developing nations to prioritise sustainability when developed nations have historically contributed significantly to environmental degradation?

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