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wendy brawer of green map

Wendy Brawer has lived in New York City for 20 years, and has spent most of them seemingly determined to etch the idea of urban environmentalism into all of our heads. As the founding director of the [Green Apple Map](#) and [Green Map System](#) projects, she charts the progress of sustainable development in the city using icons for community gardens, eco-friendly restaurants and green buildings. Brawer is also one of the most recognizable figures at environmental events throughout the city and is a fixture at Critical Masses.



Since its inception in 1995, the Green Map System has distributed over 1,000,000 green maps of New York City and assisted in the creation of green maps in 50 different countries. The project has also overseen the creation of [2 green maps](#) of Lower Manhattan, authored and

designed by children from 20 schools below 26th Street. In 2006, they released two maps, the [Powerful Green Map](#), which charted energy issues across the city, and the [Composting Green Map of Manhattan](#), which Brawer hopes will energize composting programs across the city.

I visited Wendy at the Green Map System's new office on East 4th Street, speaking with her about green maps past and present, her opinions about the city's handling of bike issues, and what she really thinks about everyone's favorite [elevated rail structure](#)

The Green Apple Map project started after a

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conversation you had with a roomful of people before the UN's Rio Earth Summit. Can you talk a little about the initial goal of green maps, and who they were intended for?

It was in the lead up to the PrepCom for the Rio Earth Summit at the UN that was going to attract environmentalists from all over the world. They were expecting something like 3,000 people to come work on Earth Summit documents for five weeks. At the time, I was trying to come up with a product that was both green in its materials and had this message and way of getting people involved in new york's progression toward sustainability. But, I mean, who knew the word 'sustainability' then? and i also had a clock ticking and no budget. so, what could i do quickly - it took us just six weeks - what could involve a lot of people in its creation as well, and would could we produce for very little money. But it turned out the map was useful for everybody.



When you showed it to all the people, what was their reaction?

Well it was positive. Maps are universal tools, you don't need to know the local language to read a map, they're very lightweight, resource efficient; so it fit. There was a sense that there was no environmental movement here, and it showed it from that perspective. It proved that New York actually had this groundswell of activity going on in all parts of the city. It started to show patterns of change, so you could see that certain neighborhoods were changing more quickly. A map changes your worldview; Even on the first map, you could see which neighborhoods were being dumped on and treated unjustly.

Then In 1992, the map was featured in the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition. Is that when you knew it was something you'd do again and again and spend more

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and more time on?

The Cooper-Hewitt was thrilling, but even before that, the map immediately had an "A-ha" reaction to it. It was very exciting, and after the map started getting out - we made 10,000 - people started writing in and calling. Then the 2nd map was published about 10 months later. That one got out further around the world. On the 2nd map, we used Wingdings and a font called Animal that we got from a Mac users group, and I noticed how people reacted to those symbols; on the first map, we used letters, like G for garbage or gardens, and we didn't have a good symbol system. But people were really drawn to the map when it used a symbol system, so a Green Map iconography that everyone could use became a priority.

Currently, how much time do you spend on Green Maps vs. your design company?

Well I haven't done much besides Green Maps since 2000. My last project for Modern World Design was at Liberty Science Center, creating a solar exhibit on the roof of the museum. It had the world's first solar theremin.

Can you talk about what inspired you to make the energy map?

Well the reality was that our map had too much stuff on it, we couldn't print the text any smaller, or make the paper any bigger while still making it portable. We really wanted to have a print map, because they capture a moment in time and behave differently than other kinds of maps. Once we started looking closely at energy in the city, we started including more on the map, for example our food choices.

To me, food is a big part of the climate change talk; methane from the animals, are you buying local? - but no one seems to be talking about that. Especially on the governmental side, I'd be really interested to see what's going to happen.

I think what I got from the energy map was that I thought it was more of a reference guide than a map - you put in some little narratives, some suggestions.

Also there had to be a glossary. When it came out in February - before Al's movie - there were a lot of climate change skeptics around. They were like, "It's a cold day, how could this be global warming?" So there were a couple other issues, but it seemed like energy was the most important, with the war and all the injustice that's created over energy, it seemed to fit right in.

Then the newest map that just came out a month or so ago is the composting map. Can you talk a little about that?

Yeah, it was really fun. It came out of a conversation with the Lower East Side Ecology Center about how we could work together. We both have the support of a funder that is really focused on Manhattan, so the first map was Manhattan only, but now there's interest in doing a city-wide composting map that will be online. I think composting is a boom that's about to happen, and if you commit [a map] to paper, it's very hard to update it. We really need to get more composting going here because there's just so many benefits to it; you get that wonderful soil, you don't have to take the waste away.

I think one of the things that comes across in the composting map, as you see the familiar outline of Manhattan, is that you see, in the Lower East Side / East Village and in Harlem, these very developed pockets of sustainable resources, and then everywhere else in Manhattan is sort of bare. Why do you think it hasn't been done in some areas?

That's one of the great things about putting it on a map, that you can see who's doing it and who's not. We're actually talking about a reprint of the map already, there's been a lot of stuff popping up.

But I think people think it's a problem because there isn't good infrastructure for it. There's three whole places in the whole of Manhattan where you can drop off your composting. If you don't belong to a community garden, you have to go to one of those three places. A city like Tokyo picks up composting that's been separated by everybody. I really feel like the city is going to rethinking its whole waste program. I hope they move recycling to the Department of Economic Development, make more compost sites, maybe even in school yards. But there's schools everywhere that could take advantage of the hands on learning experience that comes with composting.

Actually, when I saw the composting map, the first thing I thought of was food. When you look at one of the normal Green Maps, and you see that your area doesn't have a community garden or a lot of green buildings, there are a limited number of proactive things you can do. But with composting and food - CSAs, Green Markets, co-ops - it's much easier for you or you and your friends to get something done, to put themselves on the map.

You're right. And food is the kind of the decision that even a 6-year old makes at least three times a day. We have wonderful local food around here, from farmers markets and CSAs, and city farms are growing. You don't see enormous farms in the city, but we may need them some day.

When you're making a map like this, a map designed to tackle issues of progress, you want and need the community to be involved in it. So I guess what's left is how some of that community would use the map.

We really hope to change their lives in a positive way; to use it as a guide, even to a place you know quite well. Sometimes people use it to connect with nature. Maybe you have somebody that takes vacations to get some fresh air and now they know that it's right around the corner. Or, they can use it to get involved with groups that working on some of the issues we talk about. That's a really important part of the map. Or maybe they'll discover that something they thought only happened uptown also happens in their neighborhood. Getting people to change how they've always done things, that's a big goal for us.

Can you talk about how the bicycling scene in the city has changed?

Everyone's gotten more focused on policy, on the political ramifications. I'm in shock that New York City isn't doing more to encourage cycling and make the streets safer. Another cyclist was killed yesterday and once again, I'm pretty sure that there was no summons for the driver. That's become the norm, and why is that acceptable? Any other kind of manslaughter would be prosecuted. It's shocking.

We've been relegated to the gutter. Today I think is the vote on pedicabs in the city. They want to cap the number of pedicabs, but not the number of stretch limousines. The city's not really thinking ahead. What I see coming up is a lot more bike-based transportation; I think there can be a wonderful kind of flowering for purpose-built bikes. They're not cars, but a lot of the time, they really, truly could replace cars. It could be such a convivial, positive thing for New York. I'm not seeing a lot of encouragement for that to happen and that's troubling, because it's...ideal.

But I think more than anything, we'll see more and more bike shops. I've asked the city, and I'm continuing to write letters to elected officials to say, Why don't we take the tax off of bikes and bike gear? At least for Bike Month, to encourage more people to ride that way.

You were just talking about politics and Critical Mass is one of those very visible political struggles.

There's so many different kind of things going on and Critical Mass is only one. But for some reason, Critical Mass has been demonized, and sometimes people feel like, "OK, I'm going to back off for a while until things change," instead of saying, "OK, I'm going to make things change." And I don't really know what those people are thinking, you'd have to ask them. Dissent is patriotic. Many people feel that to question what the government is doing is the wrong thing to do. There's a study that compared the impacts of protest to other kinds of policy action, and they found that protest is more effective. And I wish that study would get out more. I think we've become very complacent as a culture, about the things that are going on, and we forget that small effort from people can make a difference.

There's no advertising on Green Maps.

How to pay for Green Map production is a local decision. Our rule is that anyone that sponsors/supports a Green Map has no say about its content. So aside from getting grants and other help from big groups or organizations, we send the ready to print PDF to some of the sites on the map, and we say, "Hey, can you help us print more copies?" And we got a good response.

We're making this resource called the Greenhouse right now, which is an online content management and collaboration tool center. So we're moving our registration off the desks here and onto the Internet. So that'll make it easier for people to get started - we hope. It'll give every Green Map project a place to talk about how and why they're making the maps. It'll also give the public more of an idea of how to contribute to the project. So this all goes online, hopefully, in May. Hopefully it will help our growing regional hubs all over the world; we're really in favor of decentralized leadership.

Any ideas for new themed Green Maps?

There's actually a big list of them. But one of them is a water theme. We have 600 miles of shoreline here, an amazing drinking water system; water itself is going to become more of an issue, around the world especially. The city makes such a nice bike map, so there's no need to do that. A Green Schools Green Map is a possibility too, charting both K12 & universities in NYC.

More generally, since you're in design, what do you think of some of the more prominent projects around the city, like the Brooklyn waterfront development or the Stuyvestant Town sale or the **High Line?**

I went up to the High Line with a Design Trust for NY a few summers ago, but I'm not a big High Line fan. I like that there's an easily accessible greenway a block and a half away. I think the High Line should be reserved for growing food and some kind of energy generation. Maybe a huge greywater recycling system for all the water used by all the buildings around there. Now it's going to be a public park and I'd like to see those millions of dollars for park development be used in neighborhoods that don't have parks. It's going to be a fortune to make it handicapped accessible and everything else that you need to do now to make public space truly public. There's tremendous possibility there, but they're kind of stuck in this park idea. It's going to be an elite park, and with the greenway a couple blocks away, it's a funny place to do it.

Wendy Brawer is an ecological designer based in Manhattan's East Village.

Her website is <http://www.ecocultural.info>

Posted by mike rezny at 11:55 PM

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