design samples that can only be judged by either Arabic or Latin designers but not both. In the “Money Design” case, it is difficult for a reader, unless being Lebanese, to recognize which money notes were the old or the new ones. In any case, the unselected design (maybe the author’s?) reflects anything but Lebanese cultural identity. To be fair, the section about “Basic Arabic” is too involved to be thrown in this chapter or in this review. But one must mention that the author used the term “Basic Arabic” to bundle his and Khattar’s attempts to simplify Arabic typographically without mentioning that this term was never used by either designers and is not an agreed upon term in the Arab type community, and without mentioning clearly that one of the designs is his. He states further that Khattar’s work in 1947 is “one of the earliest and most significant attempts” while in fact we know of at least two similar attempts in the nineteenth century. Homan Hallock, an American typographer living in New York, designed isolated, one shape, Arabic letters in 1865 (J. F. Coakley, Homan Hallock Punchcutter, Printing History 23:45, 2002). Nazim al-Dawlah Mukulm, Iran’s ambassador to London, had even published a Persian book in 1885 with his isolated letters type design.

The author ends his book with a useful design gallery chapter. However, with 41 percent of the figures shown being only beautiful calligraphy works, the chapter further confirms that this book, in term of audience, scope and identity, dances on many ropes. Boutros, a talented calligrapher and one active type and graphic designer, is apparently not as skilful debating involved philosophical issues. Starting with a notably political and opinionated tone, and coupled with several inaccuracies or contradictions, this book is, somehow, hard to categorize as a textbook or as a reference tool for either Arab or Western designers. It is even hard to judge how readers would witness on its pages the full picture of Arabic design potentiality since it does not consistently state the names and backgrounds behind discussed samples and whether they belong to the author. Yet, despite critical shortcomings, Arabic for Designers is an engaging valuable instrument to understand the intricacies and artistry of Arabic and multilingual design.

Counter Culture Green Provides Inspiration for the Current Sustainable Designer

As an environmentalist and designer who feels guilty daily for adorning his potentially hazardous Apple Powerbook, I have asked myself many times, “How can technology better unite with nature?” This question, however, is not without precedent as Stewart Brand and his colleagues posed a similar inquiry in their holistic atlas-sized “magazine,” the Whole Earth Catalog. The DIY-themed catalog basked in the notion that “Western Green Consumerism” could mesh cohesively with the American sense of entrepreneurial enthusiasm. To explore this question, Whole Earth provided its hungry readers with very optimistic yet practical book reviews, alternative technologies (AT), lists of materials, tools, and how-to guides that aimed at helping inspire the “outlaw designers” of the 1960s and 1970s to explore the idealistic possibility of a better “machine in the garden.”

In his politically very timely 2007 book Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism, associate professor Andrew G. Kirk of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas provides a detailed and provocative account of the rise of the Counterculture Environmentalist movement started by, in Kirk’s words, “the revolutionary” Whole Earth Catalog in 1968. His narrative of the green counterculture movement also artfully examines Whole Earth’s fall from the limelight due to Brand’s mental health and the unfortunate 1980s Reaganomics budget cuts. I find Kirk to be most poignant in his analysis of the history of the catalog in his “Epilogue: What Happened to Appropriate Technology?” where he reviews Whole Earth’s positive impacts on the present day resurgence of organic foods, renewable energy and sustainable innovation. The author convincingly argues that Whole Earth helped start the counterculture environmentalist movement but reflects that this movement still faces “(t) he problem (of) convincing American producers and consumers that there was a common ground between capitalism and environmentalism, nature and culture.”

Counter Culture Green is, for the most part, a chronological recounting of the life of Stewart Brand and his successes and pitfalls as editor of Whole Earth. Kirk’s writing is infused with historical accounts and insights into (some from Brand himself) the daily life at Whole Earth and its overall connection with the American environmentalist movement of the times. Counter Culture Green provided a means for me, and most likely for many of its readers, an opportunity to tie together an elusive American environmentalist narrative that rarely gets told outside of news bites about the Sierra Club and Al Gore in contemporary mass media. I found myself, while reading each chapter, feverishly scratching down the names of Brand’s inspirational collaborators, notably Jay Baldwin, Huey Johnson, Dick Raymond, John Perry Barlow (of Grateful Dead fame), R. Crumb, Steve Baer, Paul Hawken, and also his...
Stewart Brand, his collaborators and the historical voices of the time. His passages also provided me with a plethora of Whole Earth inspired books and essays worthy of future investigation. I am particularly inspired by Kirk’s delightfully detailed notes on the founding of Brand’s environmental non-profit organization, the Point Foundation (in Counterculture Green’s “Chapter Four: On Point”). This particular section of Counterculture Green truly showcases the spirit of the Counterculture 1970s in the United States. The Point Foundation, with millions of dollars from Whole Earth, funded a number of ahead-of-their-times projects including the New Alchemy Institute’s living machines (biological wastewater treatment), and Auroville, an ecotopian spiritual community located in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Kirk notes in his analysis of Auroville that community “succeeded because of their faith in human ingenuity and hard work.” The futurist counterculture town is still functioning today as a lasting symbol of the Alternative Technology movement powered by the Whole Earth’s ability to save the world “one hand at a time.”

Kirk is obviously enamored with the work of Stewart Brand, his collaborators and the historical relevance of the Whole Earth Catalog, but he also does not hesitate to explore a few of the failures of the publication and its contributors. Kirk makes it clear that a few of the projects funded by Brand and the Point Foundation were too misguided (like a trip to the Stockholm Environmental Conference) and didn’t measure up to some of the more savvy investments they made previously. Many collaborators took money to pursue utopian projects but failed to follow through, thus jeopardizing previously strong friendships between Brand and some colleagues. Kirk also spent time critiquing Brand’s over-commitment (which contributed to the end of the consistent publication of the Whole Earth Catalog) that exhausted his energy to keep up with all of his utopian ventures, his dedication to pursue space travel and possible colonization, and finally to Brand’s controversial support of nuclear energy. However despite these failures, Kirk continually provides the reader with the same optimism that Whole Earth provided its avid group of technological enthusiasts by his quoting of Brand “(n) othing worthwhile happens quickly in this business... the happy surprises arise from large slow movements.” This quote is an example (among many) of this positive undercurrent in Kirk’s writing.

The twenty-first century edition of Brand’s counterculture green movement may be currently experiencing one of Brand’s “happy surprises.” In Kirk’s “Epilogue” he mentions the 1994 The Millennium Whole Earth Catalog where industrial designer J. Baldwin opens the publication by asking “But where are all the windmills?” The windmills Baldwin refers to are another 1960s and 1970s Whole Earth example of the alternative technology movement that are currently again sprouting up across the United States and internationally at a more and more rapid pace. This revival can be attributed to changes in our political and social spheres as consumers and politicians foresee/accept the oncoming energy crisis and attempt to combat Global Warming. The current political climate and rhetoric is strikingly similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s as Kirk points out later in his “Epilogue.” The Counterculture Green movement of the sixties and seventies didn’t maintain its momentum due to various economic, educational, and political reasons, however in a similar time where renewable energy and sustainability are back in the corporate and public spotlight, the question is now, can we sustain the Whole Earth vision this time around? More recent Whole Earth inspired books like Worldchanging: A User’s Guide for the 21st Century (edited by Alex Steffen) provide hope that designers will again have “access to tools” (Whole Earth’s motto). However, with the advancement of web technologies, these tools may be much more easier accessed online as information and data changes more quickly than publishers are able to match. Whole Earth has recently launched their online presence (http://www.wholeearth.com) in an attempt to keep up with more modern forms of information access, but it doesn’t seem to be as usable as other online tools like the Encyclopedia of Life (http://www.eol.org/).

Andrew G. Kirk’s latest book, Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism, I believe, is a historically important book during this resurgence of green culture. It is important, that we learn from recent environmental and political history so that this time we really sustain what Victor Papenek called “the green imperative” in order to save our civilization. Designers must again optimistically dedicate themselves to explore blending nature and technology in an innovative and sustainable manner. Possibly then we won’t all feel as guilty knowing our Powerbooks don’t contaminate our water, land, and neighbors upon manufacture and disposal.


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Airworld: Design and Architecture for Air Travel
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