

Sustainable Design: Four-Module Sequence

Module 1: The Ethics of Everyday Things

Overview

This module introduces sustainable design through the objects, products, interfaces, spaces, and systems that shape everyday life. Students examine how design decisions influence consumption, waste, access, behaviour, labour, identity, and environmental impact.

The central idea of this module is **design responsibility**. Design is not neutral. Every designed thing reflects choices about materials, users, production, function, repair, disposal, and value. Students will learn to look at everyday things critically and ask what forms of care, convenience, exclusion, or sustainability are built into them.

Key SDG links: SDG 9, SDG 10, SDG 11, SDG 12, SDG 13

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, students should be able to:

- Explain how everyday design choices create social and environmental consequences.
- Apply one academic concept to analyse the ethical dimensions of a designed object or system.
- Identify stakeholders affected by a design, including users, producers, communities, and environments.
- Propose one improvement that makes the design more responsible or sustainable.

Required Academic Reading

Papanek, V. (1985). *Design for the real world: Human ecology and social change* (2nd ed.). Thames & Hudson.

Required excerpt: Chapter 4, “Do-It-Yourself Murder: Social and Moral Responsibilities of Design,” pp. 54–65.

Reading focus: As you read, focus on Papanek’s argument that design carries social and moral responsibility. You do not need to summarise the whole chapter. Instead, identify one idea that helps you analyse the hidden ethical or sustainability consequences of an everyday designed object, service, space, or interface.

Pre-class Activity: Everyday Design Audit

Choose one everyday designed object, service, space, or interface.

Examples:

- takeaway food packaging
- a water bottle
- a chair
- a smartphone app
- a school desk
- a delivery bag
- a public bench
- a hotel room product
- a shopping bag
- a toothbrush
- a food container
- a transport ticketing system
- a piece of clothing
- a café interior
- a campus space

Write **200–250 words** responding to the prompt:

What ethical or sustainability issue is hidden inside this everyday design?

Include:

- what the design is
- who uses it
- who produces, maintains, or disposes of it
- one sustainability issue it creates
- one idea from Papanek that helps explain the issue
- one SDG connected to the problem

In-class Activity 1: Designed Harm, Designed Care

Goal: Help students recognise that design can produce both benefits and harms.

In groups, students select one everyday design from their pre-class work and analyse it using the following prompts:

- What problem does this design appear to solve?
- Who benefits from the design?
- Who may be excluded, burdened, or harmed?
- What materials, energy, labour, or waste does the design depend on?
- What behaviour does the design encourage?

- What sustainability issue is easiest to see?
- What sustainability issue is hidden?

Output: A short Design Responsibility Statement:

“This design appears to solve _____, but it also creates _____. The stakeholder most affected is _____. The sustainability issue we need to address is _____.”

In-class Activity 2: Responsible Redesign Sprint

Goal: Move students from critique to improvement.

Groups propose one redesign improvement. The redesign does not need to be a completely new product. It can be a change to material, use, repair, communication, accessibility, disposal, service model, or user behaviour.

Possible redesign directions:

- reduce single-use material
- make the design easier to repair
- make the design easier to share or reuse
- reduce energy use
- improve accessibility
- reduce waste at end-of-life
- use safer or lower-impact materials
- improve instructions for responsible use
- reduce unnecessary packaging
- support local production or repair
- improve durability
- reduce exclusion or unfair burden
- make sustainable behaviour easier for users

For the redesign, students explain:

- what they would change
- what sustainability issue it addresses
- who benefits
- which SDG it supports
- what trade-off may appear
- how they would know whether the redesign works

Output: A one-page Responsible Redesign Proposal.

Post-class Reflection

Respond to the prompt:

“What does it mean to say that designers are responsible for the consequences of everyday things?”

Include:

- one idea from Papanek
- one ethical issue you noticed
- one stakeholder you had not considered before
- one design change that could reduce harm