

THE STORY BEHIND THE RECYCLING SYMBOL

Because the recycling symbol is so familiar and ubiquitous we tend to take it for granted. But did you ever wonder where it came from? Here's the story behind the recycling symbol.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new environmental consciousness was emerging in high schools, colleges, and communities across the country. In April 1970, the very first Earth Day was held, demonstrating the growing momentum of America's environmental movement.

About this same time, Container Corporation of America (CCA), a paperboard-packaging manufacturer, sponsored a contest to create a design that would symbolize the recycling process. CCA would use the symbol to identify packages made from recycled and recyclable fibers, and to promote paper recycling as an effective way to stretch our natural resources. At that time, CCA (now Smurfit-Stone Container Corporation), was the largest user of recycled fiber in the U.S., and easily could have asked its own corporate designers to create the symbol. Instead, the company decided that the younger generation, as "inheritors of the earth," would be the best source for the new design, and invited environmentally concerned art and design students from across the country to enter the contest.



Recycling symbol contest winner Gary Anderson (right) with CCA's Hans Buehler, in 1970

More than 500 talented students submitted entries, which were judged at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado. The first-place winner was Gary Dean Anderson, a graduate student at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Anderson had just graduated from USC's 5-year architecture program, and was completing one additional year for a Master's of Urban Design. His prize was a \$2,500 tuition grant for further study at any college or university in the world. After receiving his Master's Degree from USC, he chose the University of Stockholm's graduate program in social science for English-speaking students, and earned his degree in 1972.

HOW GARY ANDERSON DESIGNED THE RECYCLING SYMBOL

Gary Anderson grew up in North Las Vegas, Nevada, in the 1950s. In keeping with the times following the Great Depression and World War II, long before the recycling movement as we know it today, his family practiced a general frugality that involved re-using and recycling as much as possible.

As a child, this future architect built everything from cottages to skyscrapers with his sets of wooden Lincoln Logs and American Bricks. Every Christmas, it was his job to construct a stable out of his Lincoln Logs for the Nativity scene under his family's Christmas tree. He also liked making things out of paper - pinwheels, paper airplanes, paper chains, etc. An avid reader, he discovered origami in a school library book and made every origami design in the book at least once.

From a young age, Gary Anderson was intrigued by the idea of the Möbius strip, the one-sided construction formed by gluing together the ends of a strip of paper that have been given a twist. He also enjoyed the art of the Dutch artist M. C. Escher, who produced a series of drawings based on the Möbius strip, one of which portrays ants crawling over the folded and twisted strip of paper.

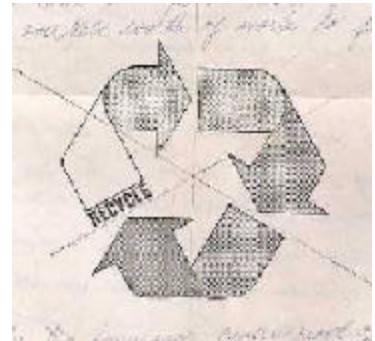


Möbius Strip II, by M. C. Escher

When Anderson began designing his three entries for the contest, he drew upon the Möbius strip concept, "a finite object, but its one surface is infinite in a way." He also worked ambiguity into the design; the symbol is "kind of round, but also kind of angular. It's flat, but it seems to enclose a space ... kind of hexagonal and kind of triangular, and kind of circular ... sort of static and sort of dynamic."

Anderson drew the symbol entirely by hand with pen and ink, without the benefit of the computer-aided design software available to today's designers. He worked out the design over a period of two to three days, although he had been mulling over the image for some time. Of the three he submitted, the winning design was the simplest. Container Corporation of America chose not to trademark the symbol, but instead left it in the public domain so that others could help spread the recycling message. For this reason, many permutations of the original design have been developed over the years.

It took a number of years for the recycling symbol to catch on and become widely used in the United States and elsewhere. In fact, Gary Anderson had rarely seen the symbol in use until some ten years after the contest, when, while traveling in Europe, he noticed it prominently displayed on recycling bins in Amsterdam.



Anderson's working sketch of one of his designs for the recycling symbol. This one appears in a letter home from college to his mother.

GARY ANDERSON'S LIFE TODAY

More than thirty years later, Anderson is still involved with environmental issues. Although he could easily have pursued a career in graphics design, his career goal remained urban planning and design. Over the years, he has worked in various capacities as an architect and planner, and has won numerous academic and professional awards.

After receiving his doctorate in Geography and Environmental Engineering from Johns Hopkins University in 1985, he joined STV Inc. in Baltimore, an engineering, architectural, planning, environmental, and construction management firm.

A self-described "dreamer, doodler, and putterer," Gary Anderson is also goal-oriented, enabling him to move ahead and complete real projects. He enjoys frequent travels abroad, and has participated in planning projects in England, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Turkey. In addition, he has taught architecture and planning in Saudi Arabia, and currently teaches a course at Johns Hopkins University. He is active in his local civic and neighborhood improvement associations, and is a member of several Baltimore museums. He sits on the Board of Directors of 1,000 Friends of Maryland, a managed-growth advocacy group.



And here he is today!

For more information, visit these web sites:

[Gary Anderson has been found! \[reprinted from Resource Recycling, May 1999\]](#)
[Make your own Möbius strips](#)
[AF&PA's Paper Recycling Symbol Guidelines](#)
[Background information on recycling symbols \[ISO Working Group Document\]](#)
[The mathematical art of M.C. Escher \[Platonic Realms MiniText\]](#)