

Revolution: Philadelphia 2005

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“Making Change [Slowly, but with Precedent]”

Design in the '90s was heady with calls for authorship, subjective, self-generated, and highly expressive design, and the new vistas of motion and interactive media. In the '00s, many designers are preoccupied with how our practice can become a socially proactive force, a practice that addresses environmental, economic, and political problems—rather than exacerbating them. AIGA's last national conference in Vancouver positioned designers as agents of change, but didn't directly address how to tackle the quite significant problem of our generally lacking expertise in anything other than formgiving. (Post-*Revolution*, I think the omission was fine, since this is actually an issue of how designers are educated, and firmly in hand in Philadelphia.)

Positioning designers as agents of change presumes as a matter of course that we bring certain skills to the table, while it also implies that as a profession our potential contribution is habitually overlooked. Our skill set includes: organizing, problem-solving, bullshit detecting; an ability to elicit, comprehend, synthesize, and extrapolate information, and to re-present it in a variety of forms for various reasons. Though individuals and their design training vary widely, this set of skills sounds quite useful and wonderful, and interestingly enough, has little to do with just making things look nice.

I don't know how serious most designers are about the profession needing to be instrumental in social change—as opposed to it generally acting as a mirror and a loudspeaker for whatever political/economic agendas prevail—but if we are committed to change, then nothing less than a complete overhaul of how designers are trained, an overhaul which privileges content and knowledge, as opposed to simply developing design skills, is in order. An aside: When I looked at student portfolios in the large hall of the national conference, I found them symptomatic: most of the work was quite formally accomplished. But very little of it was about anything significant.

In the interests of full self-disclosure, and before we talk about how designers are trained, I should admit that I'm a product of the free-for-all mindset of mid-'90s design. I entered Cranbrook Academy of Art as an older student armed with a hybrid undergraduate degree in Education and Psychology, professional experience as a writer and editor, a strong interest in and some facility for design, and a handful of adult ed and audited undergrad design courses. In a nutshell, a more well-formed version of what every traditionally trained graphic designer circa 1984 feared the advent of the Mac would bring—an amateur.

So, back to design education. At the State University of New York at New Paltz, where I teach, the design department is under the auspices of the School of Fine and Performing Arts, which means that design students in the making take the same foundation art courses as the fine art students: classes in drawing, color theory, 2-3-4D. Because the foundation work precedes the design course-

work, whatever synthesis could occur across the "making" classes doesn't. All students are also subject to the statewide General Education courses, classes in each of four broad subject areas: Composition/Arts/Humanities, Scientific Investigation (math, natural and social sciences), the US and Its Traditions, and Global Perspectives (foreign language and world civilizations). Students are expected to complete their GE requirements by the end of their sophomore year and to declare a major. I rarely see students in my advanced design courses until the close of their second year, so I have little opportunity to make any linkage between GE and design coursework. And rather than being concurrent, the foundation courses are prerequisites for what are perceived as the more specialized courses in particular subject areas, so there's little integration and opportunity for synthesis across the typical SUNY graphic design student's education. The sequential split between liberal arts and specialized education seems to imply that they are mutually exclusive endeavors.

Are there opportunities for upper level students to collaborate with each other across departments? This is something I'm interested in investigating. After four years of teaching I'm only now sussing out which colleagues/departments outside of Fine Arts might be interesting to consider fostering a collaborative project with.

But back to the problem at hand, which is what results from the lack of integration between ideas/content and their formal manifestation: Though my students are bright and talented, it's rare that they have developed intellectual interests outside of design, and this, I think, is the biggest impediment to our profession becoming more socially proactive. Without the ability to engage content, question the meaning and function of design, and lacking a critical stance, how can design be anything other than a handmaiden to status-quo agendas?

This is just anecdotal, but perhaps it isn't coincidental that the few students I've encountered who have a lively interest in something in addition to design and have pursued double majors, one notably in history and another in art history, tend to produce more content-driven design work that has a point of view and demonstrates higher level abilities in synthesis and representation of information. (Also noteworthy is the fact that they are rarely the strongest students in terms of a natural ability to make beautiful form.) The double major occurs rarely, not programatically, and only out of a great deal of motivation on the student's part.

Which begs the questions: what would happen if design students were required to concentrate their studies in both design and another area of their choosing? What if ideas were connected to making? What if it took five years of study to complete a BFA? How much further could we go if we were expert in and passionate about something more than just design?

The hybrid artist or designer—by which I mean someone who cultivates a lively and deep interest in ideas and expertise in something in addition to formgiving is nothing new. Here's a sample of hybrid individuals and possible directions:

Science and nature hybrids:

Leonardo DaVinci, who dissected cadavers to gain first-hand knowledge of the human body's construction. In his lifetime he undertook some 30 dissections and subsequently drew his findings. Despite the fact that some of his early renderings are inaccurate, daVinci set the standard for medical/anatomical illustrative representation. Pope Leo X ultimately banned daVinci from further anatomical investigations after accusations of sacrilege.

R. Kevin Alvey describes a turning point in the development of daVinci's methodology that occurred around 1510: "Previously, his method had been to interpret what he saw in the light of what he knew, merely synthesizing his observations. His new method was to first record what he saw, then investigate the functions of the observed form. In essence, Leonardo now analyzed what he saw objectively rather than restricting his observations to the limits of his knowledge." If we always see only as formgivers, even newly acquired knowledge might be colored by foregone conclusion. One way to see in a more open way might be to have multiple frameworks. [2 images]

Also in this category is David Macauley, whose interests in architecture and mechanics, among other things, have been the engine for visually appealing and highly informational books. Likewise, David Sibley, who combines skill in illustration and a naturalist's knowledge in his guides to bird identification and behavior. [1 image]

Expanding the boundaries of design practice:

Peter Behrens, whose graphic design practice commingled with his architectural and industrial design work. (These three practices might actually be linked and constitute Design with a capital "D": Design of buildings, of functional objects, of communications interfaces. At the same time, it's an occupational hazard to conflate the three carelessly, not looking at the real differences among them. Sometimes when graphic designers talk about what we do as capital "D" design, it reads as self-aggrandizement, or something that comes out of a sense of inadequacy. We seem to want to make the Thing itself, or are trying to convince ourselves that we do, rather than making something that promotes, describes or contains the Thing. But if we start with the assumption that strategies of making meaning have something in common with strategies of making functional objects and systems, of making buildings and cities, where might we find ourselves? [3 images]

Another example of hybrid practice can be found in the designers at Bruce Mau Design, back in the era when his staff was comprised of mostly architecture post-grads, hired because Mau thought their training was both more rigorous than the standard graphic design curriculum, and that their spatial orientation was a boon in creating compelling narrative and navigation. Mau's latest venture, Massive Change, posits design as the underlying solution to solving global, systemic problems (of shelter, mobility, information, visualization, market systems, energy, resources, the military, manufacturing, the distribution of wealth, etc.). Massive Change is a joint project of Mau's design studio and The Institute Without Borders, a one-year interdisciplinary postgraduate program at the George Brown-Toronto City College. IWB's mandate is "to produce a new breed of designer, one who is, in the words of Buckminster Fuller, a 'synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist, and evolutionary strategist.'" My ideas

about engaging content are probably not incompatible with Mau's about design being able to solve problems of huge magnitude, and we share a weak spot: we don't directly address how to deal with the power structures that have an entrenched interest in maintaining things as they are. In my case, all I have is a strong conviction that knowledge is power and if you can make your ideas visually manifest, so much the better. In Mau's case, the buzz around Institute Without Borders and Massive Change will likely eventually put him at the table with the power brokers. And so might change be effected.

Politics and design make good bedfellows:

Carlos Cortez, whose powerful posters are designed as part of his life's work as a political activist [focussing on worker and Chicano rights], Wobbley [member, International Workers of the World], poet, editor, songwriter, and printmaker. This from Cortez: "...a creative artist, whether it's a visual artist or a non-visual artist has to express what he or she feels the strongest about. And it would be useless to say to someone who has no particular sociological convictions that they should be sociological in their art. That would be something like the forced "People's Art" of the Soviet days. It has to come from the heart, from how one feels. A lot depends upon the awareness of the artist in question. If the artist is only interested in the commercial world, well, then sociological, humanitarian concerns are not for them." Okay, so not everyone will be interested in content. [two images]

Grapus, the French design collective founded in the wake of the 1968 student uprising in Paris whose mission was to express Leftist politics through design for like-minded organizations and cultural institutions. After 21 years of grappling with whom to work for and why, the group disbanded in 1991 over one member's decision to accept the Louvre as a client and its members dispersed to found other design studios. The Louvre decision could be read in one of two ways: co-optation by the state or a statement that cultural resources belong to all citizens, and not just to the Establishment. [1 image]

Ditto Sister Corita Kent (1918-1986), who was an internationally known artist, committed to the spiritual life and the pursuit of peace, not at a distance from the secular world. Luminaries including Buckminster Fuller, Charles Eames, Ben Shahn, came as visitors to the College of the Immaculate Heart during Kent's tenure there as Chair of the Art Department. Sister Corita left the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1968 to devote more time to her art. "I am not brave enough to not pay my income tax and risk going to jail. But I can say rather freely what I want to say with my art." Like-minded clients included Amnesty International, and Physicians for Social Responsibility. [1 image]

In their own categories:

Charles and Ray Eames, whose work exemplified lively interest in the world around them and the natural, cultural, scientific phenomena in it. They positioned design practice as an engaged partnership between the design office, the client and society.

Victor Papanek, whose *Design for the Real World* continues to have a profound influence on how I think about design—23 years after I first bought

and read it. A product designer and teacher, Papanek firmly promoted the moral responsibility of the designer and an integrated approach to making, always within the context of the audience—whether in Papua, New Guinea or in Detroit, Michigan. “The only important thing about design is how it relates to people.”

With these and other examples in mind, and barring radical programmatic change, here are some ways I've attempted to broaden the scope of my classes to engage content that goes beyond design:

– I teach more than formal and technical skills. Design is the doorway through which we engage history, technology, politics, economics, perception, and the tool through which ideas are communicated.

– Synthesis is often fostered through a strategy of combined content (design writings and writings not about design) and by having students work in pairs and in small groups. Designer/designer collaboration encourages students to discover and use other talents: some are good writers, others good editors, makers, managers, or public speakers, and these skills tend to come to the forefront.

– In my projects I attempt to strike a balance between closed briefs and self-generated work. Students are responsible for generating some aspect of the project; sometimes content, sometimes particulars of the finished form.

Here are some examples of project briefs and student work:

* Typical Column A choices:

Daniel Chandler
D.I.Y. Semiotic Analysis: Advice to My Own Students

Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller
Design / Writing / Research: Writing on Graphic Design
“Deconstruction and Graphic Design”

Scott McCloud
Understanding Comics, Chapter 6:
“Show and Tell”

Filipo Marinetti
“Destruction of Syntax—Imagination Without Strings—Words-in-Freedom”

László Moholy-Nagy
“Typophoto.”

Vadim Rotenberg
“Word and Image: The Problem of Context”

Leslie Savan
“This Typeface is Changing Your Life”

Beatrice Warde
“The Crystal Goblet or Printing Should be Invisible”

In my Design Theory and Criticism courses, students devise projects of their own by merging design-oriented and theoretical content from column A.* We read and discuss these first, and then they concoct a strategy from one or more of these readings to work with content from column B.

Last year we tackled explicitly political content: the Bush administration's National Security Strategy—thank you, William Drenttel and Jessica Helfand—and legislation before the New York State Senate for and against same-sex marriage.

One student used the readings and the NSS text as a way to develop a personal, idiosyncratic visual vocabulary. Marinetti's ideas of making meaning manifest through various typographic strategies interested him, as well as Moholy-Nagy's ideas about the visual relationships that could be made between type and photography. [three images here]

A visiting student from Brazil, interpreted an excerpt of the NSS through this rogue's gallery in a critique of American-supported hypocrisy. It was influenced in part by K's reading of *Understanding Comics* and how meaning can be made to a knowing audience through contradiction. [three images here]

This year I used the same strategy for another project, but invited both sections of the class to determine content. One class chose the extreme makeover phenomenon [which led to good discussion on the problem of surface vs. depth] while another chose stereotypes, generally racial [surface vs. depth again, but

also about the sometimes functional, sometimes not, human tendency to generalize knowledge].

This group of students collaborated on a piece about racial and ethnic stereotyping. The formal outcome, a series of table talkers, isn't that polished, but in its conception the work is quite smart. Subjects in the student union were presented with an image of a New Paltz student [from a pool of several different student-models] and asked: How old are they? What is their major/profession? What is their ethnicity? What is their religion? Where are they from? The city, the suburbs, or the country? What economic class do they fall into? What type of music do they listen to? What is their favorite food? Results were tabulated and a three-sided table talker was designed. One side reproduces the questionnaire and the photo that accompanied it, another side defines "stereotype" and the third side tabulates the results, and reveals facts about the model. Because the table talker simultaneously converts an audience member into a participant, one who can reflect on other people's responses while noting his or her own, this could be a pretty low-key yet potent tool for disarming people's preconceptions. [one image here]

Overall, these shortterm projects are as early stages of research into what could be terrific longterm explorations.

I also teach the Thesis 1 and 2 sequence for our BFA program, which is based on the model of the self-generated student project. The ideal situation is steady work over the course of the year, with the student becoming progressively more expert in a particular subject area and in making that visually manifest through design.

Projects coming out of the BFA studio this semester included an information design project attempting to make visual family dynamics by charting family members perceptions of each other; a book about propaganda whose form is itself propaganda; a prototype video designed to teach a series of interpersonal skills to young children who are autistic; and documentation of the development of a proenvironmental design language.

Let's look at this latter project, which moved through various iterations on the road to where it ended up. At first the student wanted to develop materials advertising a fictitious "good," pro-environmental company of his own invention. He began work on developing a formal language inspired by the natural environment.

The student was encouraged to not create a fictitious company, but rather to directly contact and get to know environmentally concerned businesses and organization in our Hudson Valley locale: organic farmers, health food stores, manufacturers of natural products. What he discovered is a different economy of scale than he'd expected: for smaller local businesses it doesn't make sense to operate at the scale that requires extensive self-promotion. So he shifted his research and output to a consumer info campaign. Despite his interest in communicating what he considers vital information to consumers, these results were not that visually interesting or personally satisfying.

The student returned to visual experiments based on his observations of nature and reflections on technology, without thinking too much about how they would be applied. And once he felt secure in the language, he returned to trying to communicate his message through his own entity Terra Firma, using the media of a website and embarking upon a series of informational postcards [among them "Cherish It / Protect It" and "Stay Human / Keep Nature Natural"]. Considering his process and research as important as the outcome, B used the Thesis show to trace his trajectory and engage with visitors in the museum about the environmental issues he considers vital. [six images here]

"The Family Revealed" undertook to document and make visual perceptions of members of one student's large, blended family about each other. Family members across three generations were asked to respond yes or no regarding the presence of 12 characteristics in each of their relatives: creativity, technological savvy, dramatic tendencies, introversion, ability to BS [student's phrase, for lack of a more scientific term!] verbally, ability to BS in writing [see above], the tendency to plan in advance, a defeatist attitude, extreme worrying, substance abuse, athletics, assertiveness. The student designed a visual system for making the rating results manifest and a set up in which family members' data could be compared.. Though it's an admittedly subjective system [though one which represents its own sort of reality] the project raises and responds to questions of nature vs. nurture, gender-based and generational patterns. [5 images here]

These projects and this philosophy of teaching don't meet with in unqualified success. Because students are required to make connections between ideas and content that may seem disparate before they even make something tangible, it tends to work better for a more intellectually capable individual who possesses a critical and reflective point of view. The strongest work manages contradiction and nuance well.

But I think engaging everyone in content starts to address some fundamental problems of graphic design: the handmaiden mindset that often accompanies working with someone else's content, and thinking that one works exclusively for the client. How this will pan out once students enter the workforce will be telling.

If all else fails and synthesis doesn't happen at the undergrad level, perhaps it can at the grad school level: Consider one possibility of an alternate career path in which students who've completed a BFA in design go on to pursue an MBA, so that they might make policy in the boardroom as well as visually describe and enact it. One former student is giving this option serious thought; I am interested in seeing how his career progresses.

This is all a work in progress.