

## Design Club: Why young American designers are ganging up

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*Ctrl+Alt+Design, JOIN: Design Seattle's Annual Design Review 2009 (photo courtesy of JOIN)*

As a young American designer, I am both involved with and excited by the emerging trend of design clubs in America. Although very new, these groups have the potential to create a design scene in the U.S. as vibrant and well-supported as that of Europe. Furthermore, their simultaneous formation signals a shift in American design culture—we now live in a moment where design is cited regularly as a source of economic, social and cultural growth; a national design policy is stewing; and young designers are encouraged to go into business for themselves.

Three independent design associations formed in 2009: the American Design Club in New York, JOIN: Design Seattle, and the Object Design League in Chicago. Established by designers who are dedicated to working independently, these three clubs share a common goal: to support emerging design in the United States by raising the visibility of young designers, helping them find an audience and, ultimately, structure a business. Paralleling a movement on the national stage by the National Design Policy Initiative, these clubs compensate for a serious lack of design support with their own gumption.

While collectives look inward, focused on their own ambitions and sensibilities, these groups look outward, attempting to build a lasting infrastructure for young American designers, capable of outliving changes in personnel and design culture. While it's true that young designers are always joining forces, the most striking aspect of AmDC, JOIN and ODL is the similarity and precision of their definitions. None of these groups define themselves as collectives, opting instead to function strictly as associations. Historically, collectives have allowed like-minded people to share resources and produce experimental work, as evidenced by designRAW and release1 in the early 2000s, so why have these clubs deliberately chosen to function as coalitions? The difference is primarily one of disposition: while collectives look inward, focused on their own ambitions and sensibilities, these groups look outward, attempting to build a lasting infrastructure for young American designers, capable of outliving changes in personnel and design culture. This change in outlook indicates two things: first, there is a structural gap in the design industry that demands filling, and, second, design collectives are ceasing to function as a satisfactory solution to this problem.



*Hue Are You?, American Design Club's second exhibition at The Future Perfect, 2009 (photo courtesy of the AmDC)*



*Modified furniture was auctioned to raise money for The Promise of this Moment, an exhibition co-produced by The Object Design League and the Mighty Bearcats.*

## Creating New Terrain

In March of 2008, New York Times design critic Alice Rawsthorn wrote *Dearth of a Nation*, which pointed out that American furniture design was suffering, even though the U.S. is home to many of the best design collections, auctions, stores and museums. She cites a few reasons for this. The changing structure of the furniture industry is one—"being small, independent and daring isn't valued in corporate culture"—while a fragmented design education system and lack of support for new graduates is another:

Nor does the United States provide the grants that support young Dutch and French designers during their education and in the vulnerable early years of their careers. American design graduates have to fend for themselves and generally end up taking jobs to make ends meet, leaving them with little or no time for creative experimentation. Rawsthorn's article, published in the same 12-month period that the AmDC, JOIN and ODL formed, encapsulates much of the same concerns voiced by the founding members of these clubs. This includes a large gap

between independent design and big industry with few opportunities to exist in between; a fragmented education system that doesn't give designers the tools to build independent studios; little to no resources or support for emerging designers that aspire to work independently; and a lack of representation of American designers both stateside and internationally. Though their structures vary, these clubs aim to find a way through this difficult environment, creating a new terrain for young designers by producing exhibitions, organizing public events, developing relationships with local manufacturers and sponsoring projects with a collective pool of funds.

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#### National/Regional Parallels

This search for a support structure parallels the development of a larger movement at the national and regional level. The National Design Policy Initiative (NDPI), founded in 2008 by Dori Tunstall, was developed to raise the visibility of design as "paramount to US economic competitiveness...and democratic governance." The NDPI Summit gathered designers, government officials, design education accreditation agencies and professional organizations to begin a national conversation about the development of a policy structure that would support and benefit from design's value. The project takes cues from Nancy Hanks' Federal Design Improvement Program, formed during the Nixon administration in 1972 but also proposes structural changes that address contemporary shortcomings of American design infrastructure, as mentioned in Rawsthorn's article.

For example, Tunstall confirms that "if you are a design student conducting research, there are no major governmental/federal bodies that you can apply to for funding because design is not categorized within them." The National Science Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities both provide grants for student research (the National Endowment for the Arts used to do this but no longer awards funds to individuals). Because design is not categorized within the sciences or the humanities, however, students generating valuable ideas through design research do not have the federal support that their peers do. Tunstall attributes this to the dated assumption that design is funded by clients, which does not take new models of contemporary design practice into account. Basic design research grants would help individuals within the educational system, but what about new graduates trying to start their own business? The UK, the Netherlands, France and other European countries offer diverse avenues of support to young professional designers. Tunstall says that the US should follow suit, and invest directly in design by creating an "innovation incubator grant," a funding structure that would provide material resources and mentorship, helping young design businesses get through their first two years, become profitable, and continue to experiment with new ideas and perspectives.

JOIN is also establishing credibility with local manufacturers by organizing "factory tours." Conducted by the founders of the organization, these tours aren't for sightseeing. Rather, they are used as a way to begin a conversation with a local manufacturer and understand their capabilities, which are then distilled into a set of guidelines that is presented to the design community at large. Furthermore, the NDPI proposes a reinvestigation of the US patent structure, which grants patents into two categories: "Utility," which protects an object's function and construction, and "Design," which protects ornamentation. Tunstall points out that design today is characterized by a marriage of form and function that no longer fits into these patent structures, resulting in a lot of unprotected work. Furthermore, the legal knowledge and financial investment required to file for a patent is a huge barrier to new designers with less resources. To counteract this, the NDPI is proposing a design-specific

patent category and working on making the filing process more accessible, in order to encourage the enthusiasm that young designers have for experimentation rather than deter it.



*Developing a policy proposal at the National Design Policy Initiative Summit (photo courtesy of the NDPI)*

At the regional level, the NDPI is joined by groups like Design West Michigan (DWM), the Design Industry Group of Massachusetts (DIGMA), and New Kind in North Carolina. These groups, founded between 2007 and 2008, organize state officials, design industry leadership, and educational institutions to promote design as an agent of economic growth and social change in those regions. According to Beate Becker, the Founder of DIGMA, much of what they are trying to do begins by raising the visibility of design by connecting designers to each other and to outside industries. For Matt Munoz, of New Kind, regional specificity is important—how can rural areas of North Carolina both contribute to and benefit from the design industry? DWM, led by John Berry, seeks to build upon Michigan's pre-existing design culture (Haworth, Steelcase and Herman Miller) by finding a way to quantify their economic impact and encourage more design activity in the area. Despite their lack of formality and specific socioeconomic agendas, the AmDC, JOIN and ODL also contribute to this regional movement by connecting designers and raising local design awareness, where, according to Tunstall, design's impact on everyday life is most apparent.



## The Clubs

The American Design Club was founded in May of 2008 by Simon Arizpe, Charles Brill, Henry Julier, Annie Lenon, Kiel Mead, Theo Richardson, and Alexander Williams. As a platform for young designers, the club set out to accomplish three basic objectives: create exhibition opportunities, create sales opportunities, and build community. In practice, the last two come bundled in with the first—by producing successful exhibitions, the AmDC is building a community and a reputation, which extends to the individual designers and helps them find an audience. The group also exhibits at tradeshows, like the New York International Gift Fair,

connecting designers directly with buyers. According to Richardson, this is something that they would not do individually, due to the immense expense and effort required. By working together, however, they overcome the financial barriers and are able to sell their work at much higher volumes, which is an important step in establishing a lucrative business.



*AmDC's Purpose and Worth Show in May 2009 (photo courtesy of the AmDC)*



*Annie Lenon and Colene Blanchet's Saetta Dishware at Purpose and Worth (photo courtesy of the AmDC)*

While designers are perfectly capable of working through obstacles on their own, the importance of these clubs lies in the formalization of solutions. In other words, clubs allow designers to share knowledge, share experience, and produce a structure through which to solve these problems collectively. In addition to exhibitions, JOIN seeks to cement the design community in Seattle by creating connections with local industry while raising design awareness in their community. Formed by Jamie Iacoli and Brian McAllister in July of 2008, their activities include producing an annual design review of emerging American work, profiling Pacific Northwest Designers on their website, maintaining a Seattle design event calendar and blog, and working with Brite Collective, an offshoot of JOIN that focuses on producing design events for non-designers. Interestingly, JOIN is also establishing credibility with local manufacturers by organizing "factory tours." Conducted by the founders of the organization,

these tours aren't for sightseeing. Rather, they are used as a way to begin a conversation with a local manufacturer and understand their capabilities, which are then distilled into a set of guidelines that is presented to the design community at large. According to Iacoli, this fosters lasting relationships between designers and their industrial counterparts by establishing familiarity, trust and the promise of more work, which may persuade manufacturers to experiment with unorthodox processes or lower their MOQs (minimum order quantities).



*The BRITE Lite design workshop, organized by the Brite Collective in Seattle, May 2009 (photo courtesy of Jean Clee)*



*One team's project from BRITE Lite (photo courtesy of Jean Clee)*

Finally, the Object Design League, founded by Caroline Linder and this author in February of 2009, seeks to support independent, experimental design in Chicago by providing a consistent front under which to unify, pool resources, self-promote and sponsor design events. While we engage in many of the same activities, our structure is a bit different from the other groups: we have a formalized member base, from which we collect small, biannual dues. These dues become part of the resources we use to sponsor shows and events. For example, our inaugural show, "The Promise of This Moment" began as an idea presented to us by The Mighty Bearcats, a Chicago design collective. They developed the concept and secured the space beforehand, partnering with us for the implementation of the project, using our network to release a call for entries, stage a fundraiser, get installation help and generate publicity. Ultimately, we'd like to continue to develop our role as one of sponsorship and promotion—this year we're planning to show off-site during ICFF, oversee the creation of a small design-publication, and organize a retail opportunity for Chicago designers during the holidays, and continue our ongoing series of pecha kucha-like slideshows.



Teton Blanket by Bryan Metzdorf at The Promise of This Moment, June 2009



ODL Inflatable by Thom Moran, Eric Rosenbaum and Mingli Chang at the Guerrilla Truck Show, June 2009

### Brokering Relationships

The problems tackled by these design clubs are certainly not new. For example, the barrier of high MOQs has been thoroughly explored. Kegan Fisher and Liz Kinmark of Design Glut, a

small design and giftware studio in Bushwick, New York, have addressed this by designing specifically for manufacturing, streamlining production to keep prices and minimums as low as possible. Scott Amron addressed this problem as a creative opportunity, developing Moq7, "the world's first discount preseller of next generation products." The site offers concept products at a heavily slashed price, in the hopes of raising enough funds to help the designers meet their required MOQs.

While designers are perfectly capable of working through obstacles on their own, the importance of these clubs lies in the formalization of solutions. In other words, clubs allow designers to share knowledge, share experience, and produce a structure through which to solve these problems collectively. According to Christine Atha, Associate Professor of Design History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the sustained structure of a design club is one of their most important assets—by establishing a credible reputation through shows, publications and press, they can legitimize designers to larger entities like manufacturers, potential clients, and the general public, "brokering relationships" between them. This could facilitate the growth designers need to occupy the highly desirable but sparsely populated area between moonlighters and large product consultancies: that of the "small, independent and daring."



*The British European Design Group at Maison&Objet in Paris, January 2009 (photo courtesy of BEDG)*

In fact, Atha points out that these types of clubs don't even exist in the UK because young designers are already very well supported—partnerships are often created for them. For example, the privately funded Hellen Hamlyn Centre sends Royal College of Art graduates to conduct research at visionary companies, paying them as staff for one year. At the same time, the British European Design Group sends emerging British designers on a tour of international tradeshows, allowing them to bring their work to a larger audience. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts has a special subdivision to support new design businesses through grants and consultation, and the British Design Council focuses on the partnership of design and business. While much of these programs are built into the proposal developed by NDPI earlier this year, until fully realized, young designers are doing it for themselves.



*Ctrl+Alt+Delete commemorative pillow (photo courtesy of JOIN)*

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