



DK Holland

Bringing Hope Back to Design

And relevance, intelligence, inspiration, beauty, prosperity

I've been here before: The reinvention of the graphic design profession. In the late '80s, a seismic shift changed what designers did and how they did it. This was also during a major recession. Here's how it was up till then: Clients *depended on designers* for all their design needs and didn't have a clue how it was done. *The designer's* in-person, handmade presentation was followed up by a photocopy of the mechanical *sent by the designer* for client sign off. The printer then picked up the mechanical *from the designer*. When clients needed note pads, *they called the designer*. When they needed a business card for a new employee, *they called the designer*. Perfection was the goal, which designers worked to achieve during the wee hours, "on the [drawing] board." Loving what they did. Everything was very tangible and mostly billable. The designer went on press because everything got printed.

Then, as the '80s recession rolled in, the ray of hope for clients was high technology. Their priorities shifted and they embraced computers and software in order to streamline their processes. They started to break their ties with designers. Their secretaries could make their internal newsletter "good enough" using a desktop publishing program. If good design is defined by usefulness, designers' usefulness was changing rapidly. A cloud of irrelevance hung over the graphic design community. They had to adapt or die.

Yet this adaptation was a huge detour. High tech for designers meant learning, and inventing new ways of communicating using this nascent, erratic media, edging out time that could have been spent exploring the greater dimensions of design. "On the board" became "on the computer." And ever since, design has been offkilter. Because good design is about effectively communicating concepts through a tactile, intuitive process, not bits and bytes and the limits of the boxy 2-D world of the computer.

About this era, designer Stefan Sagmeister, says, "I felt that the better the New York City economy developed, the worse the

quality output of the design community became. I observed this trend rather graphically throughout the first Internet boom during the mid to late '90s, when everybody was producing crap. My own theory on why my studio, founded in 1993, became so quickly well known is that we were among the few new studios that did not participate in the 'let's do shit and charge them a bundle' mentality."



"In 1962, with the USSR already in orbit, President Kennedy framed the challenge to us as a call to our imagination. 'The eyes of the world now look into space,' he said. 'We choose to go to the Moon.'"

2009: Another perfect storm

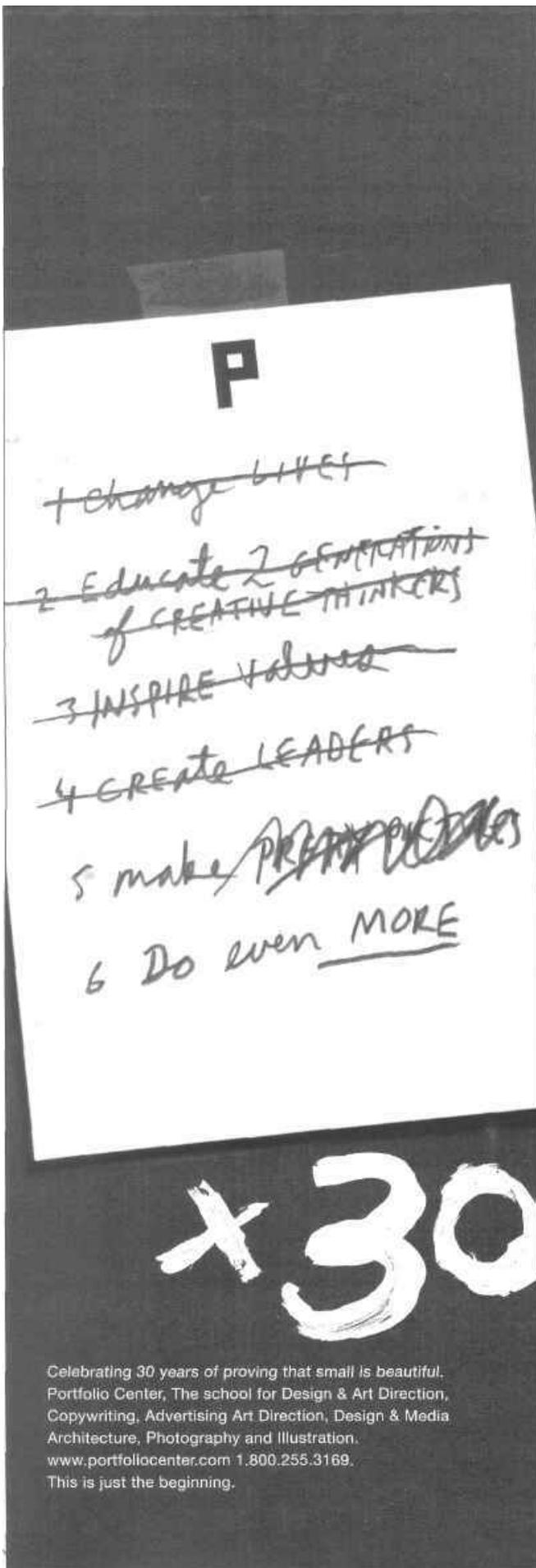
Thousands of young people have entered the design work force since the late '80s. Yet during this current recession beautiful graphic design is hard to find.

Frank Baseman, Baseman Design, is a designer and educator. He has helped organize college-level design education conferences that include students, teachers and practitioners under the aegis of AIGA¹. But since graphic design programs are often seen as cash cows for schools, students are inevitably admitted who lack the ability to become effective designers. Schools must know that there are far too few design jobs for their graduates. Baseman says, "There are untold thousands of graphic design programs

in the U.S. and only about 50 industrial design and 100 architecture programs. Why the difference? A program cannot be certified in industrial design or architecture without the sanction of their respective professional organization." Not true in graphic design. The AIGA does not certify design programs.

A lot of the design programs are just fine. Ellen Lupton, besides being an accomplished designer, heads the MFA graphic design program at Maryland Institute College of (the) Arts (MICA). She says, "We expose our students to real-world projects. Students have to document their thinking. And it's important to pay strict attention to doing things well, such as bookbinding, packaging. So not everything is the computer—there are hand skills involved.

"At the graduate level, we encourage a lot of reading. We *all* need to read newspapers and know what's going on in the



© Pierre Cardin, 1967

'Although mired in troubled times, we still imagined an up-beat future. Cars that would fly; fashions in vivid color; homes made entirely of shiny plastics and filled with magical technologies. Our Golden Age was not behind us, but full speed ahead of us.'

world. Regardless, even though a lot of my students are socially minded, they seem less engaged than previous generations. I don't see my students marching to the Pentagon.

"Designers are going to have to be prepared for change, be more collaborative, interdisciplinary, less mysterious, more transparent. More and more designers are going to be creating systems and showing their clients how to use them."

In simpler times graphic designers were taught they could design anything—but that was BC (Before Computers). Baseman sees a steep learning curve ahead, "Now you have to specialize because you have to learn all about the technology of whatever it is you're designing. Industry is saying you have to know all the programs. Your employment depends on it."

Max Lewis, a junior at MICA, speaks for a generation facing limited job prospects when he says, "We feel betrayed. We grew up with everything going for us. Now we are seeing everything crumble. What's our calling? We feel very conflicted."

The bright side

In reality, graphic design's long love affair with print meant creating ephemera. Graphic designers were part of the problem. But having moved away from print to some degree, designers are emerging as part of the solution: The door to sustainability has opened.

A noble call to action to adhere to a disciplined approach has come from The Designers Accord (designersaccord.org), a global coalition of 150,000 designers, educators, researchers, engineers and corporate leaders from 100 countries, working together to create positive environmental and social impacts. It states: "The vision of the Designers Accord is to integrate the principles of sustainability into all aspects of design practice and manufacturing. Our mission is to catalyze innovation

design issues

throughout the creative community by collectively building our intelligence around issues of climate change and humanity, and tackling those challenges with optimism and creativity.

"We advocate inverting the traditional model of competition, and encourage sharing best practices so we can innovate more efficiently and quickly." This is new for designers, who have typically worked in isolation.

The ultimate challenge is to create beautiful, not just sustainable, design. Why is this so important? Designer Milton Glaser amplifies the primal need for beauty when he says, "We are secretly programmed to respond to beauty as a species. Beauty is the means by which you move towards attentiveness that protects our species as a survival mechanism."

Quacks like a duck

If designers want to think of themselves as leaders who can move design in a certain direction, they have to present themselves as inspirational

thinkers to their clients and also as role models to design students. Glaser has been such a leader for many years. He says, "The world is endlessly interesting. The problem with graphic design is that many of the practitioners are too insular, too narrow and frequently not literate. They don't read very much...and what you find in life is that the most exhilarating thing is to discover ideas that have never been thought of and they generally don't come from the field of graphic design."

Designer Craig Bernhardt of Bernhardt Fudyma says, "I see [graphic] designers'

influence becoming less and less. The Internet is a swamp of stuff and most people can't determine what's good and what's not. There's no sensitivity to good design. Plus if you can download a photo for \$5, who's going to pay for a photographer?" Designer Allison Williams of MW says, "My daughter is taught how to layout a page, chose a typeface and border at school. She's in third grade."

There is a general DIY mentality in the business world since corporate work went "in house." Is it a blessing that the designer no longer designs the internal newsletter? Williams adds, "I'm thinking more now than I ever did. I'm figuring



Left: "NASA had genius engineers. And genius art directors. There were alternatives to designing spacesuits with aluminum foil. Images like these of the Mercury Seven Astronauts sparked our culture's creativity." Right: "Americans would travel to the stars. And we'd even go with people we didn't really like: Russians. 'Chekov' was the Starship's helmsman."

out where I'm going before I ever start to design. Because we're not being asked to design an internal newsletter, we're being asked to design a brand."

Designer Ann Willoughby of Willoughby Design is a member of the Accord. She is inspiring *and* she is walking the walk. She says, "Sometimes graphic design is not the solution. We must find ways to improve the human condition to the extent that we can. Graphic design comes last. We were getting ready to design the brand for a bakery, but I saw that the client's business plan needed work and so I put her in touch with really smart people [consultants] and now she has a great business plan. Now we're ready to do the brand. We saved her a lot of money and time. It would have been immoral to design for a person where the business model was not solid. I feel their investment is like my money."

Big picture/small picture

MW is sometimes brought in solely for the idea phase. Williams says, "Savvy retail clients like Target, Starwood Hotels, hire three design firms to each design a logo—phase I only—for a new program they are bringing out very quickly. The designers Work for Hire² and then the client decides what they are going to use, changing it themselves if they feel like it. We bring fresh thinking to the client's staff. It's great fun. But then again, the designers may only see the seed of their work in the brand, and get a small amount of money. Was it worth it?" While this is partly cost cutting, it's also the reality that you can't stand over the shoulder of the independent designer. You can't own that person like you can a staff person.

And yet the independent designer can affect practical change in their clients' business that amounts to major cutting costs. Willoughby says, for instance, "We're developing the identity for a clinic devoted to refugees and immigrants. We did their communications audit and found all the waste. We can transform the way they work. They're very excited. They are going



Left to right: "7/16/1969: The world stops to watch the United States as Apollo 11 blasts off for the Moon. The next time the world stops to watch the United States is on 9/11/2001. President Bush frames our response to the attacks, 'You're either with us or you're against us.' Did we lose our imagination for a while, our daring, our ability to be inspired? Not just about space—but about everything? The world's most pressing problems now rest on our own shoulders. They' can no longer solve anything. Not 'me.' As Thomas Jefferson said, it is only 'we' the people working together who will invent the future we need." (We logo: COLLINS: design firm; The Martin Agency, ad agency.)

to spend a couple of hundred thousand dollars, but compared to what they are going to save over time, that's nothing."

Obama in the nick of time

Designer Brian Collins spoke at the AIGA Gain Conference in 2008 [his captions are included in this article]. His dramatic, nostalgic presentation opened designers' eyes about how Americans became engaged in a positive future in an era where huge threats were posed by the USSR, and that, in the early '60s, President Kennedy's positive, confident vision inspired design across the board—through advertising, animation, industrial design, architecture, graphic and fashion design.

Kennedy inspired hope that counterbalanced fear. And Collins also pointed out the devastating difference under President Bush whose awkwardness and myopia instead fostered fear and grievance in the general public.

Today President Obama has an opportunity to bring back hope and confidence, the way Kennedy did, through charismatic leadership. Design can once again reflect an optimistic future. Obama's two campaigns³ have both been highly effective, beautiful, positive forces. He clearly understands the power of design firsthand.

Designer Tucker Viemeister, lab chief of the Rockwell Group, says, "We have a window here with Obama, in contrast with the past administration. Design is about imagining the possibilities, then applying an almost scientific method." This is very much in keeping with Obama's fresh approach: looking at what is not working and what is.

Students whose entire careers lay ahead of them, need the greatest boost. Lewis remembers stories of the Kennedy children and sees youthful energy in the Obama family, "Kids in the White House. It feels like springtime."

There is a lot of basic work ahead. Designer Cheryl Heller, Heller Communication, says the corporate system must take some blame. "All of our management models come from the

Industrial Age. Design has been serving that old model that is failing in all ways. Corporations rely on growth; resources are finite. Until we come to grips with that, we cannot make significant change. Who cares how lovely your typography is?"

The future: solutions or problems?

It's up to us. Designer and educator Tom Dolle, Tom Dolle Design, says, "Designers will play an increasingly important role in the shaping of society by solving real problems (not just the pursuits of business), once we get past the fear hump of technology. This will also force us to work in teams and cooperatives to bring multiple skills to the table. To me, that's much more rewarding and important than the older model of the sole designer creating an exquisite artifact that only other designers ever see or appreciate."

Dolle, who was taking off to a three-day seminar on Dreamweaver when we spoke, says, "We are still in the 8-track-tape stage. The smart designers now embrace four dimensions. We came from two dimensions."

"The issues that are facing us are real and critical" says Viemeister, "and that's perfect for new designers. It's going to require massive community effort to bring people together."

Designers make things come to life. Encouraging people to visualize a positive future in a complex, often contradictory and scary world. Now that is a role worthy of the designer. CA

Author's note: Thanks to Brian Collins for the captions that appear in this article.

Notes

1. <http://designeducators.aiga.org>.
2. Work for Hire requires the creator to give up all rights and title to his/her work. Employees work under this term.
3. Organizing for America BarackObama.com, designed by Scott Thomas, Obama logo by Sol Sender.