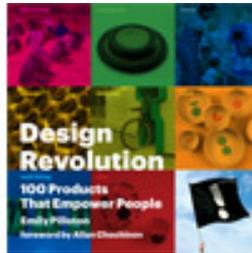


This is a design revolution?

Helen Walters

A new book purports to show the potential impact of design when applied to doing good. The argument's confused, but there are lessons for executives.



Emily Pilloton - Metropolis Books

There's a lot to applaud in this book. For one thing, the author, a trained industrial designer and founder of nonprofit design agency Project H Design, doesn't trot out the argument that if only mere mortals understood designers and their craft, the world would be a better place. Even though that's clearly what she believes.

Instead, Pilloton goes on the offensive, smacking her intended audience of fellow product designers squarely in the face.

Take this, for instance: "Today's world of design (specifically product design) is severely deficient, crippled by consumerism and paralyzed by an unwillingness to financially and ethically prioritize social impact over the bottom line," she writes. "We need nothing short of an industrial design revolution to shake us from our consumption-for-consumption's-sake momentum." Golly.

Later, Pilloton tells of design students asking her advice on where they should apply for work. Once she says, she used to dutifully trot out a list of seven or eight companies she believed were doing smart, socially responsible design work. Now she finds herself responding: "Don't work for a design firm." Her reasoning? Design is too important to be limited to the design industry. Instead, she figures: "Let's solve problems where they need solving—not in the confined loft office spaces we traditionally inhabit, but out in the world, in organizations, communities, and institutions that can benefit from design-based ideas."

Design's impact on society

This is a valuable idea. But it's also not a new one. To be fair to the designers who've been busy not making a living from playing foosball in loft spaces, many talented professionals have immersed themselves in work at for-profit and nonprofit firms for years.

Though he's not a socially focused designer, Jonathan Ive, for instance, left a design consultancy (Tangerine) to work at a company (Apple) (AAPL) precisely because he realized he could have the influence he had dreamed of only if he worked within a corporation. Note that even a talent of Ive's stature was able to make real impact on business and the world in general only when a design champion in the shape of Steve Jobs arrived in the C-suite.

So not all of the arguments here may be fresh. Pilloton's words will doubtlessly stir an audience of fledgling designers who are deciding on what to focus and where to head next. For the rest of us, the 100 products that make up the bulk of the book (see a slide show of 25 of them) were clearly chosen to counter Pilloton's provocative downer of an opener in order to show the impact that design can make on society.

There's some wonderfully thoughtful design work on display here. Air2Water is a company making machines that create purified water from thin air. The Jaipur Foot prosthesis is a quick-fit, low-cost restoration for the use of a limb. SinkPositive recycles hand-washing water for use in the toilet cistern, a simple but glaringly smart and sustainable reuse of water.

A product design tour, in 2010

Others are less revolutionary. Y Water, for instance, is a brand of bottled water aimed at children. To her credit, Pilloton acknowledges that another heap of empty plastic water bottles "raises issues of environmental sustainability." But then she argues that because the bottle was designed to become a toy after its contents have been drunk, it should be allowed a pass. That seems like a copout from an author who, pages earlier, pillories pop singer John Mayer for suggesting that people should adopt just one green initiative and stick to it.

Pilloton, who founded Project H in 2008 and who will next year take many of the products seen in this book on a traveling gallery tour to high schools and colleges around the U.S., is clearly smart and deeply engaged in her subject matter. But she might have done better to find one theme for her writing and to stick to it, rather than tilt at so many different topics. She takes on everything from the perils of 21st century consumerism and the right way to approach sustainability to the promise of design thinking and how business should be engaged in the process, to the problems with design education. She's passionate, but the sum of her arguments can be more overwhelming than entirely persuasive.

One powerful takeaway from this book is that it's almost impossible for companies or individuals to create anything for a demographic they don't intimately understand. On the basis of the invention and ingenuity on display here, it's clear that many of the world's needy residents are not waiting for designers or businesses to step in to help. Their solutions might be primitive or jerry-rigged, but at least they're appropriate and useful. Smart designers and businesses should realize this. They should roll up their sleeves and muck in, applying their combined talents to the creation of products that truly demonstrate the impact of good design. It can get awfully cold up in those ivory towers, even the ones with foosball tables.

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