

20

**YEARS
OF
CHANGE**

**GRAPHIC
DESIGN
IN PAST
PRESENT
& FUTURE
DECADES**

DREAMS CAN COME TRUE

As previously opposing worlds collide, Johnny Hardstaff envisages new designer-client relationships

Please permit me a moment of professional candour: the dream I have been chasing since leaving St Martins in 1992 has been to be paid, as a designer, to make just whatever I want. Not what the client wants, but what I want. Some might consider this a move from design to art; I would strongly disagree. The model I have dreamt of is essentially design-based; it is just that it requires the designer not only to design the solution but to understand the necessity / problem and write the brief too: the designer as instigator.

If the past two decades are best described as an accelerated period of technological democratisation and growth, then I predict that over the next two decades we will learn how to harness these technologies in order to radically redefine the function and definition of the 'designer'. Yet it is the revolution in distribution that is now having the greatest impact on how we designers work - and, much more importantly, on what it is that we make.

It was always hard to be genuinely impressed by the subtle nuances of a commercial designer's deft touch within a tight brief for a conservative client, but even more so now, when the worlds of graphic design, illustration, fashion and moving image are colliding with technology and with each other in one splendidly protracted creative car crash. Convention and minutiae leave me cold. I'm impressed by emphatic and remarkable creative visions, and it seems clients are too.

The mass audiences of old have fragmented into fluid, shifting subcultures, and while television reels from the Web's knockout punch, commercial imperatives have ensured that advertising is quick to adapt to a deregulated environment. Once advertising shouted at the nation, but in a world of the 'Like' button, clients need to whisper. It is no longer a monologue but a

shifting, fickle dialogue, and, as a result, clients' messages are becoming not only more targeted but much more adventurous.

In short, my dream is coming true. Clients are learning to recognise left-field creativity and, delicately, buy into it. Where once they might have tried to shape it, they are often now becoming sponsors, remote patrons even, and thus empowering designers to say more in very different ways with far less external control and censorship. Both audiences and designers are getting what they want. Better value, better opportunities and better experiences.

The stigma that once followed 'advertising' around already looks outmoded - the sector increasingly offers the most significant and viable opportunities for creative freedom. Over the past year I have initiated projects that begin to allude to this significant change; completed projects that would never have happened two or three years ago (such as *Darkroom* for Philips Cinema Parallel Lines - corporate clients currently seem most interested in the point where interactivity and storytelling meet); and welcomed yet more potential projects in through the door.

As commissioning models explode, we will see the rise of niche designers: subcultural specialists defined not by any one discipline but by their own particular interests. We will see greater value placed on self-initiated / authorial projects, and witness an expansion of thrilling creative visions from a radically different design community.

Tomorrow will be most exciting for the design students of today. Why gain work experience, when your role is to redefine how design works? Why even try to understand what 'commercial' means, when commerce itself is chasing non-commercial messaging? Why be overly immersed in specialist 'design skills', when your role as a designer is to expand and think beyond the medium? In fact, why be at all pragmatic, when dreaming is of such significantly greater value?

It won't be for everyone, but then nothing ever is. Let's reconvene in 2031. It's a bold claim for bold times, but now has never been more exciting.

Johnny Hardstaff is a director and designer at RSA Animation, London

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CRASHING AND BURNING

Design and business make a volatile mix, says Jim Northover, but it is one we cannot afford to dismiss

There was a point, some two decades ago, in the early 1990s, when I thought that nothing about design was going to be the same again. It was one of those significant moments. The crashing and burning of design companies was almost audible. Over the next few months it was like tinnitus; a constant, ringing reminder in your ears that it could all be over soon.

Some of the old certainties about design had gone, and new uncertainties had yet to make their impact. Many designers' tentative investments in Mac technology had demonstrated that new skills were needed, and some old ones were no longer relevant. The internet had still to make its mark. A buoyant period for design had finally ground to a halt.

Gradually, things picked up again, as they always do, but this time I was left feeling that it was no longer wise to be subject to the vagaries of a single economy: Britain's.

Once the design sector had shrunk back to a manageable size, and talk was no longer of price-to-earnings ratios but of concepts and typefaces again, many designers started looking overseas for work. For me, that period was characterised by more international work, opening offices in Asia, spending time on aircraft, and seeing big projects realised in countries I had never been to before. This was followed by project collaborations in the US. As the century drew to a close, it was another moment to reflect.

For those of us who had left college in the late 1960s (we were the British *soixante-huitards*, but without the political violence), it seemed as if we had been in a hurry to make an impact, and the 70s, 80s and 90s became that opportunity.

Starting out on your own as a design business in 1975 seemed vaguely mad, but the market gradually began to respond to designers' ideas

about how businesses could identify themselves more clearly and communicate their activities more forcefully. By the late 1980s we were all believing too much of our own hype. By the end of the 1990s we had convinced ourselves that the future was digital, and were doing it all over again. Another bubble burst, and again designers struggled to make a living. Yet another decade on, and here we are again.

The signs are not all bad though, as we look forward. A bit like the iPad2, successful design businesses will be thinner, lighter and faster in the coming years. Work patterns will continue to change, with teams forming and re-forming as projects come and go. Company structures will be more fluid and informal, continually coming together, changing shape and breaking up. Having an office, once the *sine qua non* of being in business, no longer seems so important. We can work remotely and need only meet face to face in order to discuss, to present or to formalise client relationships. Most of us will be independents, freelancers and contract workers, responsible for developing our personal business brands. 'Who we know' will continue to play a key role, so building our networks of contacts will remain vital. And luck will continue to play its part.

One thing we can be sure of: there will be more ebbs and flows, more crashing and burning every decade or so. Designers should be getting used to it by now.

Jim Northover is a designer, writer and co-founder of design consultancy Lloyd Northover

CHANGE THROUGH MAKING

Jack Schulze and Timo Arnall see more and more designers making it all up as they go along

Once there was a kind of design work that held vocation at its core. Furniture design or graphic design, the bit before 'designer' was what you actually made. But contemporary design seems to involve many crafts, with a literacy in larger new domains rather than in deep single trenches.

There have been some significant shifts in media, retail, advertising and technology, which have changed the way design works. Video design, graphics, software, typography and electronics are materials we use, rather than disciplines we are part of. We might feel at the centre of things, but we are not formally part of design.

After our vocational degrees, with once-clear career paths in graphics (Schulze) and film (Arnall), we chose to explore new technical landscapes on the Web and on mobile phones rather than what happened on a cinema screen or the printed page. Now all design disciplines include software, even print and packaging, because behaviour has become more important than stuff. What things do has become more important than what they are.

So if you take a design approach that points at

local / national contexts and traditional materials, and apply it to international media channels with a sensitivity to strategy, business, media and technology, you can affect the world culturally in ways that were previously outside the possibilities of design craft.

This kind of cultural effect used to be very rare. There are instances of simple elements of graphic design reaching global audiences: the Nike logo, say, or particular record covers. But these were made in very rarefied contexts. Access to broader global channels is now straightforward - but we can also affect and invent the channels themselves. We design the means through which the design happens, challenging the concepts, behaviours and means of production of the book as well as designing its content and form.

At the core of that is an increasingly widespread braveness and spirit of invention beyond any single discipline or design brief. Some of this can be traced back to the technology start-up culture in northern California. It isn't the wealth or the technical glamour of technology that is interesting in that history. There were (and are) small groups of mixed-discipline people punching far above their weight, through invention and a smart understanding of the cultural and financial situations within which they exist.

These were groups of people who were choosing to affect the world by making things in it, not through debate, and there are strong parallels with design. Aaron Koblin (technology lead at Google Creative Lab), Jack Dorsey (creator of Twitter) and Dennis Crowley (chief executive of Foursquare) are examples of high-flying operators emerging from design education in the US.

This domain is rough work, a hard choice, rife with arcane technical priesthoods and subject to the strategic and financial weather in global machines. We are not arguing for an end to traditional design craft, but for designers to have access to a broader palette of materials through literacy in business and software development.

There is little certainty. Most clients and technologies are in long-term flux. But this is also the best context for invention and agency. Change the world by making things.

Timo Arnall and Jack Schulze are designers at BERG in London

ORDINARY VALUES

Design discourse is slowly learning to appreciate the essence of the everyday, writes Alice Twemlow

In 1994 I was a history of design student at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Through studying history and connoisseurship I began to realise that I wanted to focus on the contemporary and the everyday. My research on the design of club and rave flyers was unusual in

'We design the means through which design happens, challenging the concepts, behaviours and means of production as well as content and form.'
Berg's Jack Schulze and Timo Arnall (opposite)

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PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL SAVER

that context - willful even. At the V&A it was more customary to write about eighteenth-century chairs, gas lighting or corsets.

So reading Keith Robertson's article 'Spot the difference' (*Eye* 15), with its cool, non-judgmental analysis of supermarket tabloids, struck a chord. When Robertson wrote: '[mass-market graphic design's] conventions are instantly understood by its readers, yet, like the black sheep of the typography family, it is a phenomenon that most design discussion ignores', he flagged a compelling conundrum: the design that is part of most people's lives is constitutionally incompatible with the design that designers and design writers talk about. Never mind 'black sheep'; mass-market design might as well be from another planet.

Another essay that became a touchstone was Nicholson Baker's 'Clip Art' (*The New Yorker*, 7 November 1994), which describes in intricate detail the design, production, evolution, marketing, use and social implications of the chrome-plated nail clipper. Written as a riposte to Stephen King's dismissal of one of Baker's books as 'a meaningless little fingernail paring', 'Clip Art' invoked a stream of literary references to fingernail parings, from Norse myth to Joyce and Nabokov. For these writers, as for Baker, the humdrum, overlooked fragments and marginalia of everyday life are a source of meaning.

Over the past twenty years, design of the everyday has been gradually 'legitimised' as subject matter both in publishing and museums. MoMA's 2004 'Humble Masterpieces' show refocused attention toward the quiet brilliance of the Post-it note, the paperclip and the Bic pen; the Walker Art Center's 2003 exhibition 'Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life' examined design's relationship to the ordinary; and club flyers are now a part of the V&A's collecting plan.

My own interest in the material culture of the quotidian has continued: I've written about the New York Greek deli coffee cup, street stencilling, walk / don't walk sign interventions, Amazon product reviews and the IKEA cafeteria.

You would have thought that blogs would have afforded more analysis and interpretation of regular and mass-market design; that the scratchcards, key rings, greetings cards and Angry Birds Rios of our lives would have been contemplated and their implications discussed. And yet, all the blogs seem to do is to document and catalogue images of these things. Lists (see *Eye* 47) and collections rarely convey meaning, and they do not contribute to design discourse.

News, reviews, profiles and captioned images have survived the migration to blogs and are flourishing. However we still need well written, well edited feature articles that probe a subject and extract its significance, using art direction, editorial pacing and multiple images that allow a story to develop over several 'pages'. That's a challenge for the next twenty years.

Alice Twemlow is chair of Design Criticism at the School of Visual Arts, New York

LOST IN FLATLANDS

Will the next generation of page layout programs give us back our sense of space, asks Gerry Leonidas

The first page layout applications threw the constraints of older typesetting environments out the window. All of a sudden, layered compositions, tints and gradients, and wild type choices at 360 degrees of orientation were easily possible. Yet page layout applications still build documents on an imaginary canvas, an arbitrary 'pasteboard' where stuff is dropped on. The pasteboard holds a sheet of paper that is always perfectly flat, and imitates no material properties. But is not the exploration of materiality, of the experience of handling an object, a prerequisite to decisions on layout? The thickness, flexibility or transparency of the paper, the depth of the spine and the curvature of a page all matter.

The main tools of a designer are visual hierarchy, sequence, proportion, proximity and association. In other words, space - around and between elements. Typefaces and all the dark bits follow. So placing two-dimensional objects on a flat, uniform, disembodied surface flips the perception of space during the design process. Instead of a positive value, explicitly marked as an element of the composition, space becomes the leftover of systems that handle boxes where the dark bits flow in. Object-orientated applications such as Quark and InDesign have proved very bad at helping the designer capture proximity, sequence and hierarchy: the underlying space is the same at the centre of the page and near the edge, and the structural relationships between different elements are very difficult to translate into visual rules.

The boundaries of objects behave the same whether the frame contains text, image or other elements. And the visual edges become subservient to structural ones. (Is the right margin of a left-aligned paragraph really the edge of the box that contains it?)

The shallow angles that result from thrashing out ideas with pencil or moving bits of paper on a sheet are very difficult to replicate on screen: placing at an angle is not the same as rotating something that always starts out straight.

Furthermore, working on a near-vertical screen, with pretty wild zooming capabilities, focuses attention to the line-level details, and disguises the compositional decisions at the level of the spread. The misconception that what is on the screen is a truthful representation of print reality is all too easy to swallow. There is something to be said about looking at things at 1:1 scale, and at the same angle as your readers.

For design educators, instilling in students a healthy dose of critical attitude towards their tools, and making them ask at every opportunity 'How is this machine translating my intentions?' should be a priority.

The most interesting developments in typographic design happen in two areas: one on screen and one in print. Onscreen, data-rich applications, aggregators and magazines on tablets are defining new paradigms for navigating texts.

Is anybody willing to wager against the next competitor to InDesign being an online service, a Web-based page layout application? For starters, it would probably do away with palettes. (Palettes are evil.) And it would enable better cross-platform publishing. But it might also give us the opportunity to recover our sense of space. *Gerry Leonidas is senior lecturer in typography at the University of Reading*

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

David Barringer on the one sure thing he has grasped in two decades of graphic design life

1991. Microsoft and Apple introduce TrueType. Kodak sells the DCS-100, a 1.3-megapixel digital camera, for \$13,000. The MP3 format is standardised. The World Wide Web launches publicly on 6 August. I am 21 years old.

1992. QuarkXPress for Windows arrives. I go to law school.

1993. US President Bill Clinton unveils the first White House website. Indigo releases the E-Print 1000, a digital press. I get married.

1994. Adobe buys PageMaker. Carnegie Mellon University builds the world's first wireless internet network. The first laptop computer is the IBM Thinkpad. I lay out the school newspaper on a Macintosh Classic II.

1995. Disney releases Pixar's *Toy Story*, the first CGI feature film. Internet users number 16 million. Dot-coms boom. Amazon.com opens for business. I pass the Bar exam. My daughter is born.

1996. Adobe and Microsoft partner to release OpenType. Macromedia Flash is released. PalmPilots arrive. I do not want to be a lawyer. I do not know how to make a living. My son is born.

1997. Megapixel cameras are marketed to consumers. DVDs arrive. CD-RWs arrive. Microsoft invests \$150 million in Apple; a month later, Steve Jobs returns. I live in an apartment. I am hired part-time as a writer.

1998. Weblogs appear. The online Drudge Report breaks the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Google is founded. I learn photography and art direction on the job.

1999- Sub Pop distributes songs in MP3 format. I finish the first draft of my novel and save a copy on an Iomega Zip disk. The BlackBerry arrives. InDesign arrives. *The Matrix* arrives. Millennial panic arrives.

2000. Computers still work. Dot-coms bust. I have a company car. I publish a book of stories. I am 30 years old.

'1991. Kodak sells a 1.3 megapixel digital camera for \$13,000. 2001. Movable Type arrives. Wikipedia arrives. September 11 arrives. 2011. Tools come and go. There is only one tool I will always use.'
David Barringer

2001. 26 million people use Napster to swap music files for free; a lawsuit shuts it down. The first iPod arrives. Movable Type arrives. Wikipedia arrives. September 11 arrives. 2002. eBay buys PayPal. I live in a new home. 2003. Google buys Blogger.com. WordPress arrives. Apple opens the iTunes store. The US invades Iraq. I buy a Fuji Finepix S2 Pro digital camera for \$2300. I use InDesign for the first time to lay out a magazine for work. I use my digital photos. I never use film again. 2004. MySpace, Facebook and Gmail launch. I write a book about graphic design. I move to North Carolina. 2005. Adobe Creative Suite arrives. Illustrator CS includes 3D tools. YouTube arrives. My novel is published. My graphic design book is published. 2006. Twitter launches. Nintendo releases the Wii. The USA Patriot Act allows broader email and internet monitoring. I rely on InDesign 2 and Photoshop. Illustrator frightens me. I lose my part-time job. 2007. The iPhone arrives. I lose my company car. I lose my cellphone. I have to pay for all my software. 2008. People buy 139 million smartphones. I freelance. I write design essays. 2009. I publish a book of design essays. I design it using InDesign 2. I can't afford CS. 2010. The iPad arrives. I have a desktop computer, cable internet and a part-time job teaching design students, with whom I Skype. I am 40 years old. Internet users exceed 2 billion. 2011. Tools come and go. There is only one tool I will always use: my mind.

David Barringer is a design writer, legal journalist, novelist and educator

OUT OF THE DARKROOM AND INTO THE LIGHT

Sue Steward considers the speed, the globalisation and the democratisation of digital photography

Twenty years is a small percentage of the 150-plus years of photography's history. But the changes in its technical, compositional, theoretical and aesthetic meanings and functions have been dramatic.

As a former picture editor who inhabited Planet Analogue for a large part of my life, I have watched photography morph into something almost unrecognisable. Much has been abandoned: the tactile pleasure of prints, the never-failing magic of the printing process, the dedication of printers in newspaper darkrooms, the excitement of flicking through cabinets in specialist picture libraries now swallowed up by rapacious digitised agencies, the many priceless newspaper archives destroyed in the 1990s.

In 2009 we lost two crucial elements of the old

order. Polaroids - those small, wet, glossy, square prints you dragged out of the camera, shook dry and watched as an image appeared like a tiny oil painting - turned out to have the lifespan of a mayfly. Andy Warhol may have elevated them into fine art, but Polaroid film expired in a blaze of publicity on 09/09/09. A month later we said goodbye to Kodachrome, the film that brought a palette of brightness, optimism and colourful romance into the postwar years. Slides, trannies, transparencies came back from processing in branded yellow plastic boxes, to be viewed on a lightbox through a loupe, an eyeglass that had to be a Steiner - mine cost 74 quid in New York in the late 1980s, and I treasure it... as an antique.

Another element of this evolution from analogue to digital is the slow, creeping death of the professional darkroom. In 2007, Richard Nicholson began documenting (in Kodachrome) the 204 still operating in London. When he completed the project in 2010, eight remained in operation.

Having paid homage to past technology, I must add that I love digital photography. I love the speed of working and viewing images on computers, watching how digital photography is mutating, changing our visual encounters, interpretations, skills and equipment. I love the way photography competitions are now thoroughly international because images can be pinged cheaply across the globe in an instant rather than being sent as expensive prints. Digital democratisation is unstoppable. And digital photography has become crucial for transmitting images from warzones, crises and scandalous revelations, from places photojournalists can't reach.

I love the explosion of global interest in photography, the expansion of exhibition space for what until recently (shockingly) was not even considered art; how the business of 'fine art' photography is now discussed on the pages of the *Financial Times*; the number of academic texts on the theories around photography; and the rise of photobook publishing fairs.

In parallel to 'mondo digital', professional photographers such as Susan Derges and Adam Fuss and scores of students are looping back to the medium's analogue origins. They are devising fresh ways of making images based on nineteenth-century processes: the shadow-catchers of camera-less photography who are exploring Fox Talbot's Calotypes, and the hugely expensive, time-consuming platinum process that Irving Penn re-introduced in the 1950s.

These arcane processes co-exist alongside technologies that allow the convergence of still images and movies through smartphones and multifunction cameras, and the galleries on screens and tablets and media walls, the instruments of the future that are literally 'writing with light'. The contents, however - portraits, landscapes, documentary images - will never change.

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