

On Unprofessionalism

Over the past 12 months, the tricky issue of professional certification for designers has reared its head once more in the UK. In this 1994 essay, *Michael Rock* makes the case for a more relaxed attitude



A professional design conference is something like living inside one of those printed design annuals – all of the work has sprouted arms and legs and is talking a mile a minute. Ray Gun is hobnobbing with Emigre, Aldus is eyeing Adobe across the room, a Benetton magazine is whispering in the corner with a corporate annual report, Yale disses Cranbrook over cocktails. Put that many graphic designs and their designers in a room, and you cannot help pondering issues of professional association.

The concept of professional standards has plenty of manifestations – educational accreditation, professionalism, AIGA certification – as well as all

the allure that goes along with the image of The Professional: respect, high pay, beautiful lovers. You can't spend an hour at a design conference without someone decrying the lack, the need, the desire for any or all of them. Journals are peppered with articles like Making Accreditation Work or Board Certification, An Idea Whose Time Has Come. It seems like everyone, from Paul Rand to Katherine McCoy, has pondered the idea. The concept lurks under the move to establish national design councils, motivates designer debates, and directs the curriculum of art colleges and graduate schools. But what is a design professional? Do we really need a professional organisation of graphic design?

The predominant feature that seems to run

through any gathering of designers is a deep-seated insecurity. Designer anxiety is rooted in a fear that what we do is not respected, worthwhile, important. This anxiety is fuelled by a business world that, in general, neither respects nor considers design particularly worthwhile or important. (What's the first thing to go when the profits shrivel?) As designers seem hell-bent on impressing business, this is a big problem. Thus the design activity is fraught with a desperate quality. In that desperation, designers turn to professionalism as their savior.

Professionalism works by constructing an artificial wall around an activity and by keeping people systematically excluded from calling what they do the same thing as what you do. The logic runs that

Q If we could develop a set of standards, either through the education system or through an exterior organisation, we could then produce a measure against which we would conclude who is, and who isn't, a graphic designer. (Actually what it would really conclude is who aligns with the sanctioned definition and who doesn't, telling us more about the values of the tester, than the testee.) The medical profession, for example, for better or worse, excludes herbalism, acupuncture, midwifery, and faith healing as outside of convention, therefore exotic, different, dubious. This may make more sense in fields concerning life and death (doctors, cab drivers) or activities involved with things that have to stand up (structural engineers) than it does in a field that has to do with communication, taste, aesthetics and fashion.

Attendant to the move toward a guild-like closure is the development of a specialised jargon and a set of mysterious trade practices. In order to accomplish a separate identity, graphic design has to be fortified against other activities that border on its kingdom. So in a headlong attempt to market themselves to business as a quasi-science, graphic designers have artificially defined the activity by elimination, insisting that they are not artists, not illustrators, not photographers, not industrial designers, not writers, not architects, not printers, not typesetters and especially not advertisers. Artists – considered suspect, imprudent, possibly subversive, probably destitute – tend to make the design-buying middle manager, with an eye on the bottom line, twitch. Getting the company to part with its money proves easier for a suited man, preferably greying at the temples, representing an organised profession using an articulate and complex language of technical terms. (One of the great fears attached to the advent of the Macintosh and desktop publishing is that it has initiated others into our secret language; demystified our code of fonts, rags, picas, and leading.)

“United States society esteems the exercise of educated skill, and honours those who are professionally trained,” C Wright Mills observed. “It also esteems money as fact and as symbol, and honours those who have a lot of it. Many professional men are thus at the intersection of these two systems of value.” A title or an acronym after a name is a class signifier, a sign of position and community approbation. Design professionalism is advanced along these two fronts: the acquisition of high learning that is equated with high culture; and the attainment of real-life experience and the big pay-off.

The PhD approach posits an image of graphic design as an altruistic service and an intellectual pursuit, safely above the disagreeable association with dirty commerce. Graphic design is promoted as a kind of aesthetic public service by which the world is saved from visual anarchy. The patina of the university and its association with fine printing, bibliophilia, and erudite scholarship are exploited, endowing the activity with a certain cultural authority. This model invests heavily in developing a historical canon and may employ complex meta-languages and theory. It is often accompanied by calls for the accreditation of educational programmes and aspires to academic goals well beyond those accomplished by the proponents.

The MBA approach is based in nuts and bolts pragmatism. It's the bare knuckles approach to the profession in which one earns his or her stripes by serving time in the trenches. Success is signified by wealth. For this anti-intellectual school of professionalism the esoteric, pedantic, overly theoretical approach of the academy is dismissed as self-indulgent and misguided; the real goal of design is to please business and sell product. Out of this position a basic strategy of professional corporate design developed based primarily in results, rationalism, and a close examination of what exactly it is that business expects.

A certain normative behaviour has risen around the practices of big corporate design studios. But an attempt to adopt the standards of business design as a definition of the wider activity is sure to fail. In addition to narrowing the activity and severing design from other forms of mass communication, the imposition of professional standards shifts the field from a meritocracy, leadership by the talented, to an artificial system of rules and dictates.

And so certification of professionals by a group organised to serve those same practitioners only stultifies design, ensures that a single value-system remains predominant. The AGI (Alliance Graphique International) is the example. In addition, certification sends a signal to business that there is a unified and accepted definition of design that is exterior to performance. The organised profession legitimises privilege, and promotes success by conformity rather than risk, as well as stresses professional cohesiveness over client or community satisfaction. This gives rise to the condition we have today in which we tend to be more concerned with the intra-professional discourse than our relationship with those who use our products. “Charlatans satisfy

clients,” notes historian Everett Hughes, “professionals satisfy their colleagues.”

Ironically, professionalism is usually advanced as a service to the clients, protecting them from unscrupulous practitioners and shoddy workmanship. In fact, professional organisations serve their members, limiting competition, excluding alternative practices, and legitimising and fixing higher fee structures. Since definitions of what design is, and should be, are constantly revised and in flux, organisations tend to synthesise an artificially stable image. Often design systems are challenged by the introduction of ideas from outside the profession, from technological development and from the development in the arts. Unless standards were constantly revised, guidelines agreed upon one year may be useless the next.

We might be better off if we jettison the idea of a singular definition of what design should be. If we were to do so, much of the divisiveness that plagues and trivialises the activity might disappear. There is no reason why design should have some unified field theory that governs the entire practice. I am always amazed at the sentiment that there are some over-arching principles that should necessarily apply to an alternative magazine, an annual report, a street map and an album cover.

Rather than model the design activity on architecture or law, perhaps we should view it as a kind of elaborated speech or writing. Writing is a common activity shared by all and practiced on many levels. Like design, writing is integral to human communication. Yet there is no call to standardise all speech or all writing or even standardise the way in which all writing is taught. Writing and speech are practiced eclectically; from poetry to graffiti, to novels, newspapers, tabloids and love notes. There is academic writing and experimental writing and religious writing and profanity and ‘bad’ writing that comes over time to be considered ‘good’ writing. For every Nabokov there are thousands of Danielle Steeles and millions of hacks pounding out stories and articles at 25 cents a word. I can appreciate, in differing amounts, both the back of the cereal box and a structural analysis of it. We celebrate the diversity of writing, the diversity of speech, the universe of information, but bemoan the paucity of good design. If we released ourselves from the realm of imposed standards, we could see design as a true meritocracy, where the cream rises to the top. 

Michael Rock is co-founder of New York design studio 2x4. This piece was first published in ID magazine and on 2x4.org

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