

The Future of Design

Abstract

The design industry is changing and re-defining itself constantly as the definition of design evolves. Design is a broad and fast-paced industry that has only been officially recognized for the last fifty years or so, but has roots as old as those of art, planning, and perhaps even nature itself. As design struggles to find its role in society, it intersects with the world of business, engineering, marketing, the economy, and all sensual experience. In recent years the effects of globalization, economic instability, business and society have accelerated the rate of change in design. In this paper I will attempt to define design as I see it and speculate about the future of the field.

Keywords

Design, Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Information Design, Experience Design, Deep Design, globalization, consumerism, business, technology, environmental issues, economics, social and political issues, role of design, problem solving, industry, planning.

Introduction: What is Design?

Design comes from the French words for drawing (dessin) and planning (dassein), which are derived from the Latin word designare, to designate, mark,

or sign. These varied origins suggest the breadth of the field of design and also the difficulty in defining design. Designers often have difficulty defining what it is they do, and thus the industry is often misrepresented and misunderstood.

Design is a process that can be applied to many fields. It is the process of planning used by artists, engineers, architects, town planners, scientists, and many others. The process of design includes such steps as research and information gathering, idea generation, prototyping, testing, and redesigning. To design is ultimately to create or invent, to plan or communicate an idea. Design means planning, but that is not always how it is perceived.

My background is in primarily visual and graphic design. The graphic design industry especially seems to fail to see design as a process. Often, when people hear the word design they often think of fashion, graphic, or interior design. Many people consider a designer's work to be nothing more than decorating, including some designers themselves. This misconception has made it difficult for design to gain respect and even more difficult for the process of design to be applied to real-world problems. The role of design is expanding, however, as the industry develops. Design holds promise when viewed in a broader, interdisciplinary sense. By viewing design as planning and communicating ideas rather than just decorating, we can use it to better the world.

Design's role

Design currently plays a large role in business and economic interests, especially in the fields of graphic, web, and product design. These design industries further consumerism, consumption, and globalization—goals of businesses and corporation. Designers serve corporate and industrial clients by designing products and then stimulating desire for them through advertising and corporate identity. Even the design of business models and workflows seem to serve those at the top of the hierarchy and not the workers. The spread of brands across the globe is just one indicator of the power design gives to business interests. After all, designers are partly responsible for creating the brand image and implementing it throughout a company. However, many designers do not feel at home serving only private interests. Even those that do have a hard time communicating with clients and aren't as involved in business planning as they could be. Part of the problem is that designers don't normally speak the language of business and their clients don't fully understand the value and importance of design. Nathan Shedroff defines the problem: "design is... mostly, an elitist undertaking that has very little impact on the world because it is too inwardly focused on itself. At the very least, to have an impact on business, it needs to be focused on the same issues business is and speak the language of business leaders." In other words, designers need to broaden their horizons and demonstrate their value to the world of business in order to have an impact on it.

Visual design is probably most often employed for advertising; which is why graphic design is so closely tied to (and is often synonymous with) commercial art. As advertising continues to invade our public, private, and mental landscapes, design becomes more and more prominent. However, when so much talent is occupied by advertising's interests, there is less focus on real-world problems, social and cultural causes, and many of the possibilities for design in the future. "Design is increasingly being left out of the up-front thinking and strategic portion of complex problem solving situations. While the size and complexity of problems facing clients, facing the world is expanding, the reality is that the scale of the problem solving skill among designers has not kept pace," (The Burning Platform). There are many opportunities for the design industry, it is not as if there are a lack of calls to action. It often seems that much of the industry is too caught up in their commercial clients' interests, and those that push the boundaries, work for social and environmental causes, and those that work towards the goal of a better society are a small minority.

"Designers often refer to themselves in terms of the artifacts they create... instead of the process they're engaged in... The design process itself is complex and universal and can be applied to virtually anything," (Irwin). In order to shift design's role towards more rewarding, beneficial, and meaningful work, designers need to value their creative minds and the processes they use in design. The design process could be applied to more than just advertisements, commercial web sites, and print materials that are the focus of most visual

designers. It could be utilized to design a better society, a system for cleaning and recycling waste water, or a community based on sustainability. Today designers who want to make a difference take on pro-bono projects such as public awareness posters or print materials for non-profit organizations. But there is so much more design can do. It seems that the idealism and utopian visions of designers in the past has been replaced by a desire to increase profits and focus on commercial needs. “The term [graphic design] was originally conceived by the field’s early practitioners as a way to differentiate their activities from their counterparts in advertising and commercial art... Their hope was that ‘graphic design’ would develop into a true problem-solving procession...”(Nini). This goal has been muddled and lost in much of the design industry today.

Deep Design

Deep design is one possible direction for the future of the design industry, and one that I hope will spread and be applied to more and more areas. Deep design is focused on the design and planning process, and looks “deeper” than traditional design practices in earlier stages of the process. A deep designer will focus on broader variables tied to their design, such as its environmental impact throughout its lifespan, how it will be perceived by and affect its viewers, and how the design can be used to solve various problems. “Deep designers are especially concerned with what goes in. Their products and processes are low impact from start to finish, in many cases contributing more than they take....

Deep designers aim for more than just another marketplace transaction; they aim for a product that will deliver its service without side effects, while giving total value and satisfaction,” (Wann, 4-5). Deep design is interdisciplinary and the process can be applied to any type of design or planning, from designing products to cars to systems to communities. It draws from sciences and social sciences and looks past the product to the people who will view or use it, the environment it will be used in, and its effects on the world at large.

If all designers adopted the process and ideas of deep design, which include sustainability, usability, longevity, flexibility, and using natural systems as a model, the possibilities for design are endless. Deep design could change the way we envision not only design but the way our society is organized. Deep design centers on thorough planning and looking at all the possibilities and effects of a design. “Convergence of science and technology is what deep design is all about, that is, mixing the right ingredients by design rather than serendipity. Deep design allies the scientist with the designer. It also...allies itself with society,” (Wann 171). Deep design is the kernel of all design disciplines: the critical thinking and problem solving process of planning.

Deep design includes being more deeply involved with clients in order to fully understand a design problem. This entails more research and a better understanding of the client’s industry. Deep design requires “Mastery of new scaled up problem solving skills that better match the size and complexity of challenges facing clients [and] facing the world today. Mastery of new cross-

disciplinary communication skills to better reflect how complex problems are addressed in organizations today,” (The Burning Platform). Deep design means looking past traditional boundaries of design and thinking in new ways. This may involve becoming more interdisciplinary or even more specialized in an unconventional area. Deep design means envisioning the entire life cycle of the product, process, or message being created and considering all the factors involved in the design process at every step along the way. It means looking deeper into those involved in the design process and everyone the design touches. Overall deep design means being open and aware to all the possibilities and consequences of a design.

Nature as a Model for Design

One aspect of deep design is looking past design and seeing the connections it has over its life span, how it is used, and what processes or systems it is modeled after. In some parts of the design industry, nature is being looked to as a model for design. This makes what is designed by humans more harmonious with what is designed by nature. Natural design is more than just green or environmentally friendly design, it is design based on natural patterns or processes; design sensitive to the effects the process and the product will have on the natural and social environment. Nature has many things to teach us about design and organization. “Living systems theory tells us that life’s natural tendency is to organize into ever greater levels of complexity—in networks,

patterns and structures that emerge out of seeming chaos without external imposition or direction. Organization wants to happen,” (Irwin). Chaos thus plays a role in the organization of nature, as do intricate patterns and connections. Irwin goes on to say, “the point may be to recognize and work with this natural flow of emergence and to see any solution we create...as part of, and an impact on, larger complex systems,” (Irwin). Nature recycles everything, it does not waste and it is adaptable to change. By learning from nature we can create better designs, whether they be for a simple layout, a business model, or the structure of our society. By learning from nature we can create a better world.

Our current way of life is about as far from nature as it can get. In our quest to conquer, discover, and dominate the globe we have begun moving faster than nature can keep up with. “We became increasingly disconnected from nature as we began to sell pieces of it. We outpaced our support systems.... We’ve always been creators and designers, but only in recent history have we focused this aptitude on producing surpluses and manipulating whole ecosystems,” (Wann 165). The way our culture is designed and functions is in direct opposition with nature’s model. While nature thrives on diversity, flexibility, and interdependence, our culture tends to isolate us, speed things up, and focus only on the short-term goal of profit. As Terry Irwin puts it, “most of our civilization’s infrastructures, from corporate America to a global economic model based upon capitalism, are predicated on models of unbridled growth and short-term results.... Design in nature is predicated on finite limits and it clearly

manages its affairs with the longest possible term in mind.” By working with nature rather than against it, we can move in a new direction, towards sustainability and long-term stability. Design, as a planning process and a way of thinking, can bring much to the world by working in harmony, and in mimesis, of nature.

Possibilities for the Future of Design

Design can be a force that promotes a healthy, beneficial, and sustainable culture for generations to come. Design has the power to be at the forefront of problem solving in wide and varied situations. All we have to do is apply the design process we already know to problems outside our normal range of thought. “We must first identify what we want—cultural flexibility rather than rigidity, diversity rather than homogeneity, decentralization rather than centralization, and so forth. We can then figure out what designs will give us what we want,” (Wann 43). Design can solve problems at a much deeper level than it currently covers. Basing design on the processes of nature is one way to improve the design of society, and part of this is focusing on sustainability.

Working towards a sustainable and stable society will require the collaboration of many disciplines and a series of planned changes. It also entails a broad education effort and a shift in priorities. These changes will need to come about in all sectors of society, including the design industry itself. “One of the big problems with design and sustainability is that design has evolved into an

endeavor (or, at least, an industry) that is antithetical to sustainability. So much of design is about unnecessary decoration, revisions when they aren't required, throwing out the old just to make room for the new, fashion over function (and meaning), etc," (Shedroff). Many facets of our societal system are based on similar defects in thinking. The evolution of the design industry will be only a small part of the evolution of mankind and our way of life. Design may even be a catalyst of our evolution and a leader in the creation of a sustainable society. We could certainly use the push. "Our technical-industrial civilization is threatening to destroy our life on earth. A radical change is inevitable. There is perhaps, still a chance that this change could come about through our own conscious efforts rather than forced upon us by a catastrophe.... The crisis of our product culture enforces a new design aesthetic," (Rams). It's time for design to take the position it deserves: a leader at the forefront of problem-solving, critical thinking, and change.

The design process can be used not only to identify and understand problems, but also to generate discourse that leads to solutions. Designers must look deeper into their skills and what it is they really do, and realize that "design skills and processes can contribute to solving problems other than appearance and "awareness" and that we're not only designers. We are also citizens and there's no reason why we can't get involved like other citizens that don't have design skills," (Knemeyer). As designers, we can learn to apply the process of creation, design, and innovation to larger and larger spheres of influence. We

can start with our own clients. By becoming more involved in their industry and more in tune with their needs and the needs of society, we can help to guide our clients towards a brighter future, not just for their pockets but for the entire world. After all, many corporate clients already have international influence. “American brands and their commercial communications have the power to affect real change—not only in fixing the image that Americans are imperialist, gluttonous and abusive of the planet, but in eliminating the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ that has been deepened by globalization,” (McCarron). Designers are in charge of the brand image and public face their clients put forth to the world. They often create the channels through which communication from the company to the customer flow, and also manipulate the appearance of a company. We need to begin having responsibility not only for our work, but also for our clients. If clients have questionable practices or ethical standards, can’t designers speak up and use their expertise in communicating to explain how these practices hurt the company and ultimately the world? I hope that in design’s future, designers are appreciated for their problem solving skills and creative thinking abilities, and will rise to the status of a trusted advisor to clients.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Design is powerful, and the sooner designers realize this power the sooner we can utilize it for the benefit of all. As communicators we have the power to reach out to people, engage them, and open their minds. As problem solvers we have

the ability to break down problems and plan for success. Now we need to harness our potential and use it to creatively and deeply tackle the problems we find all around us. The “ability to see complex problems, frame them within their proper context, deconstruct them in order to understand their root components and relationships to the whole and then develop effective solutions is the essence of design,” (Irwin). These skills will be necessary in designing a better society and a better future.

There are a plethora of possible paths design can take in the future, and perhaps we have a ways to go before we are on the right track. I hope that the industry I will soon enter will be one inspiring change and making a difference in small ways and large. Designers have many skills and thought processes to offer the world, now it is time to use them for important and beneficial endeavors. These skills include the ability to deconstruct problems and conceptualize solutions, the ability to communicate messages that engage all the senses, and the ability to reach people on emotional and psychological levels. We need to “...start thinking long and hard about what sort of world we want to live in, about what we could be doing with our skills, about the causal relationship between our personal integrity and the way we make our living. Designers exercise immense unacknowledged control over the public discourse; we need not be unanimous in our opinions and our aims to being exercising that control more purposefully, each in his or her own way,” (Mok). We have a long way to go in this world, but design can make it happen. Through deep design, sustainability, consulting our

clients and taking responsibility for all the consequences of our work, designers can help to create a more fulfilling, equal, balanced, and harmonious society and a healthier future.

I hope that the design industry I am about to enter is one that is moving towards deep design and solving real problems, but in order to be a part of the evolution of design, I have a lot to learn myself. While learning design has given me the abilities to visualize problems, plan and research effectively, and communicate, there are many things that my education has failed to teach me. Many of the skills I will need to be a successful designer will take a lifetime to acquire. Many come from areas outside design. In order to be a deep designer, I will need to acquire knowledge and experience in a variety of fields unrelated to design, from ecology to business to sociology. In order to identify and solve real world problems, I need more worldly experience. I need to meet new and different people, travel to new places, and bear witness to what some of the problems in the world cause. I will need to have a broader understanding of design and expand my skill area past visual design to conceptual design and higher level thinking. I hope to examine the world with a goal in mind, a goal based on sustainability and deep, effective design. Once I see the problems that need fixing, perhaps then I will see how my background in design, organization, and communication can help to create solutions to these problems. One thing is for certain: as a designer that wants to make a difference in the world, I can never stop learning.

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