

The More Things Change ... The More They Change

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Design moves from service to strategy, the BID is the new liberal arts degree, and other observations.

There is something odd about the way practicing designers approach design teaching. They approach it critically, and in so doing, they create the impression that what's wrong with design teaching is that it is an imperfect, even shoddy, preparation for a perfect, or at least, excellent profession. This I find suspect. I think it is in fact, an imperfect preparation for a profession that is often not very good at all. I think that any design teaching that is worth working toward is one that would aim at preparing designers, not for the kind of design offices that now exist, not for the quality of design work now being done in industry, but for a much better level of design than we have ever seen.

Ralph Caplan said these words in 1962 at a panel discussion on design education at the University of Illinois, and as I read them forty-four years later I cannot help thinking that this issue still stands today.

We still hear industry complain that we are not preparing our students well enough. In an ever-accelerating race to provide our students with what it takes to hit the ground running after graduation, educators continue to pack a five-year program into a four-year sack, adding new courses in design leadership and strategy to the overload caused by the addition, in the 80s, of computer-aided design, and in the 90s, team projects with engineering and business. The students in programs meeting this challenge are tottering under the strain, and those in programs that aren't, stand on graduation day unprepared and looking for a friendly direction. It's clear that we have work to do.

Design education can't end at graduation, nor must it be the sole responsibility of our schools. The demands to keep up to date require offices and corporations to step up to help staff grow their skills and capabilities. In addition, the offices that our students walk into must themselves change. The demands of the competitive global environment require organizations to do some soul searching and reorganization, to provide an internal environment that truly fosters innovation and will enable designers to thrive and to do the best they're capable of.

In a recent email exchange, our colleague, Craig Vogel, wrote to me:

The two biggest challenges we face are not coming from Asia they are in the US. The first challenge is overcoming the lack of economic support and political clout for ID programs in art schools and universities compared to engineering departments and business schools. This is true for both undergrad and masters (not to mention PhD programs). The second is the lack of

economic resources and the proper mind set in design practitioners to support research projects and that go beyond sponsored studios.

It's clear that, in addition to design education, industry has work to do as well.

And what will answer Caplan's call for a "much better level of design work, "better than anything we have seen?"

I propose to you that it will be design that is integrated into the world more thoroughly, taking on needs that have been long unmet or barely addressed. Let me list a few of these challenges and opportunities.

Designers in consulting and corporate offices: This is a service model under strain. Not only is it harder to keep the doors open in the face of the increasing commodification of basic design activities, but the model itself is outdated. Industrial design can no longer consider itself a service provider to industry. We are strategic partners.

Designers as strategists: This is the innovation model that is taking hold. The new MBA is the MID, not the MFA, as Daniel Pink maintains. Our graduate-level students are being groomed to take ID's unique mind-set and facile innovation into the strategic partnership role, to provide design leadership in business decisions. Deciding what something will look like and how it will work is no longer the limit of our task: deciding what to make in the first place is the issue.

Designers forging paths into ventures, partnerships and other endeavors: This is an entrepreneurial model in its infancy. Some designers and industries have always worked in a partnering arrangement; more are seeing this as a way to evolve the old model of design consultancy: it helps to have a few fee-based clients to pay the overhead, but when a shared-risk venture pays off, it pays.

Design for the majority: This is the social entrepreneur model that has yet to be fully realized. Victor Papanek, the grandfather of this movement, said at that same discussion in 1962*:

A little while ago [it was] said that the one thing that couldn't be challenged is that we operate in a free world of competitive industrial society. ... I think that's a myth. On a competitive basis we very often are outdone in terms of human needs. For instance ... a car that will be able to ford streams. Now you may not be able to sell that on Main Street but you can sell it to that 95% of the world that doesn't have roads and which doesn't have bridges.

IDSA's new Design for the Majority interest section, chaired by Leslie Speer, will showcase the growing body of work being done by designers and educators as social entrepreneurs. The definition of a life spent in design is growing wider. Instead of laboring in endless iteration to serve luxury products to the fortunate few, some designers look outward to the vast unmet needs of the many. The charges given by our mentors are being met by us, their students.

Design as a basic competence: How do our baccalaureate students face the challenge of graduation? Which way do they turn, when more ID graduates are being produced by a larger number of programs, worldwide? The answer: they go into that world, addressing their unique set of skills to problems not previously thought to be ours. An undergraduate ID degree is a new form of liberal arts education, creating well-rounded, well-equipped problem solvers who

can take ID methodology into new territory, applying our "design thinking" to new fields and finding rewarding work there.

If the new MBA is the MID, and the new liberal arts degree is the BID, as design educators we need to open our students to the opportunities.

* From a published transcript of four major addresses and a panel discussion delivered at the annual meeting of the Industrial Design Education Association, held at the University of Illinois, March 17, 1962. Many thanks to Ed Zagorsky, FIDSA, for sending me a copy.