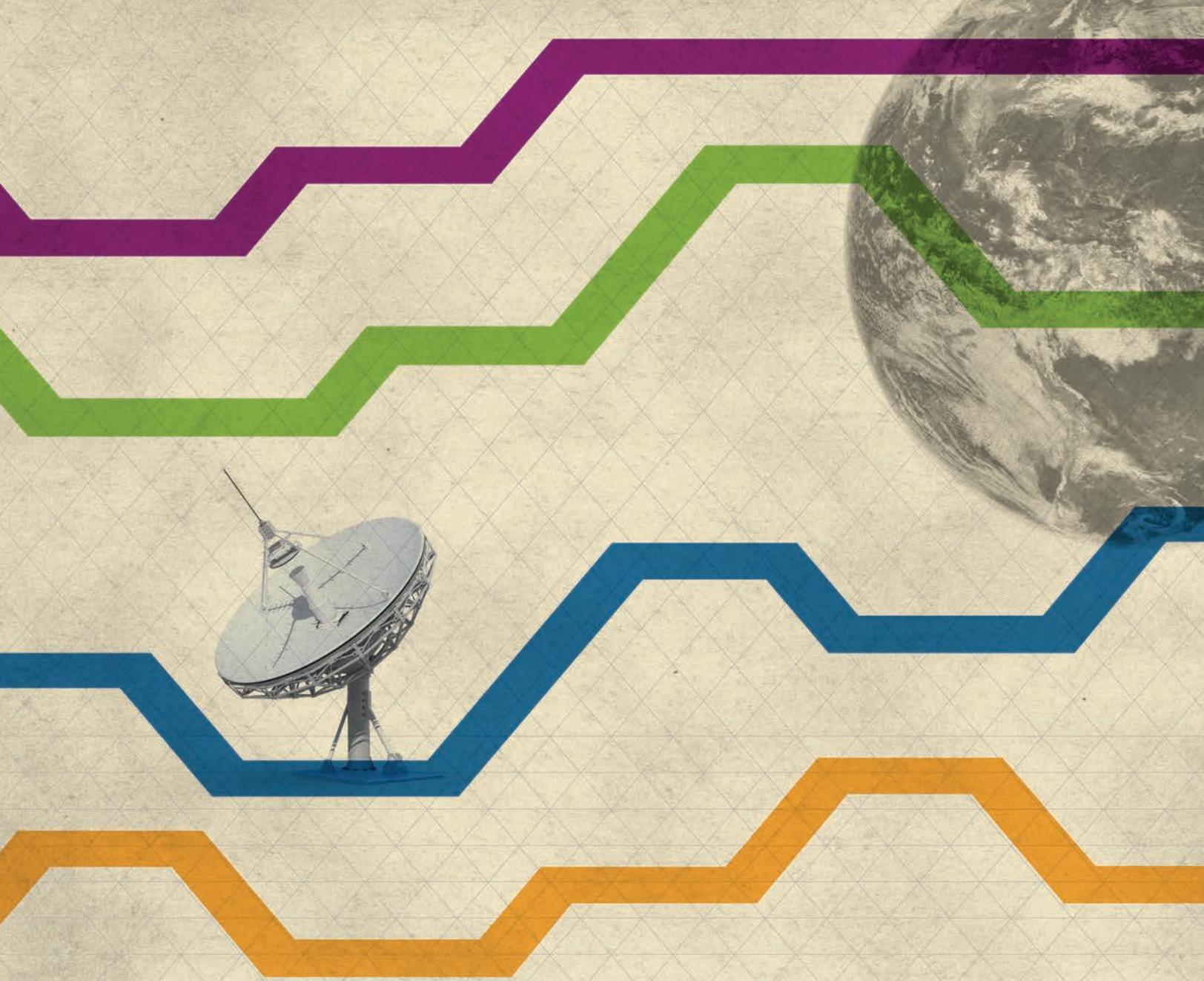# WHERE DESIGN IS GOING,
AND HOW TO BE THERE

BY CHERYL HELLER

Design, like almost every industry, has been changed forever by **technology, global access** and **social innovation**. It's time to interpret the evidence around us – there are lessons to be learned, and new types of talent required to thrive.

In the mid '90s, I was executive creative director at Siegel & Gale when Kodak's professional products division asked us to help sort out some misguided branding on one of its global film products. They were confident that fixing their marquee brand was the key to fixing their business, but in reality, they were caught in a technological upheaval far more disruptive than any product turnaround could fix. Technology, some of it of their own making, was undermining their entire market, closing the gap between professionals and amateurs and engendering a movement of hobbyists who took over the business of making images.

Average, "amateur" folks replaced professionals because advanced products automatically gave them new abilities. The security and confidence expected by and for professionals was eroding, impacting the entire ecosystem of the imaging world. Today, everyone with a phone is a photographer. The sea of change is well underway, and Kodak's dominance is hardly a memory.

Similar shifts are everywhere. Academic institutions offer curriculum online, experimenting with new platforms for learning, potentially competing with their own traditional offerings. Businesses are transformed by social media and the transparency it brings; shifting power from their own empires to their customers'. Citizen journalists create content more popular than traditional news sources, amateur filmmakers become stars, maker fairs attract multitudes who do their own manufacturing, publishing no longer needs publishers, augmented reality will soon make it possible for everybody to design their own worlds, and people who just like to cook are setting up stalls and selling food—professionally.

Other consequences result from this: With greater freedom to express themselves, citizens declare their values. A multitude of platforms make it seamless to speak, and to act on beliefs. One outcome is the outpouring of extremists, and the tools and information

that become instruments of violence. The greater outcome, though, is the hopeful one. Whether it's called giving back, social impact, social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, or the generically plaintive "change the world," social innovation has become an unstoppable dynamic, which the visionary writer Paul Hawkins called the "greatest movement on earth".

And design? It's smack in the middle, as a practice transformed by technology in much the same way that Kodak was, disrupted by the transformation of every industry it touches. Likewise, design has deep potential to contribute to society as a way of voicing long-held values that honor nature, equity and justice.

Design Thinking; IDEO turned up the volume by marketing Design Thinking—doing a brilliant job of making it synonymous with design. The good news is that more people are thinking about design than ever before. The bad news? Everybody who can think now thinks they can design. Consider the parallel of design thinking with amateurs armed with a snapshot setting on their cameras.

For example, TED fellow Juliette LaMontagne recruits a group of 18 to 24 year olds from various professions, teaches them design thinking, and turns them loose to design products for developing communities. "I started a design-led social entrepreneurship program called Breaker. We assemble interdisciplinary teams of young people, issue them a global challenge, introduce them to the design process, and expect them to design a commercially viable product or service that will contribute to the solution of that challenge," says

increasing convergence of technology and social good that you see ... there's definitely an upsurge in interest for channeling creativity into socially-useful ends."

This is progress. More people have a voice and access to the tools of design. Our lives are richer, we share more than ever through open-sourced engagement. Everybody who wants to has a shot at changing the world.

THE NEW FACE OF DESIGN

Progress complicates for some as it simplifies for others. To be a professional designer in this enabled world, we must reinvent what it means to be a professional designer. Otherwise, we will be the frog in the water that reaches the boiling point so slowly that we don't notice until it's too late (which I understand is not actually true, but you get the point).

Changes present opportunities for those who leap. Disruptions create openings that are potentially better, bigger, more relevant. There is an opportunity for design to claim and step into an important place in this new world.

It requires, though, that we do for ourselves what we do so elegantly for others: create a new identity that imagines, then claims a bigger role in a better future. Designers are born with an identity crisis— it's the nature of all we desire to be and do. We are strategists, implementors in any media or form, and successful entrepreneurs. We want a seat at the CEO's table when business decisions are made, to hold our own

AVERAGE, "AMATEUR" FOLKS REPLACED PROFESSIONALS BECAUSE ADVANCED PRODUCTS AUTOMATICALLY GAVE THEM NEW ABILITIES.

LaMontagne. "In less than one year, we've created and launched three products aimed at advancing adolescent literacy and urban agriculture, respectively."

Economist Daniel Altman plans to teach villagers all over the world to design and manufacture their own products, markets and economies. No professional designers required.

Finally, there's the explosion of interest in design for impact: AIGA's Design for Good program, Ogilvy Earth, countless blogs, curriculum, workshops and conferences. In an article in 3BL Media about a Gates Foundation grant for communicating social impact, Aaron Koblin wrote: "You only have to look at ... the

in an argument with the McKinsey consultant, to understand customers better than the client does and to deliver creative breakthroughs at every turn. We want to do different things all the time, and do them in wildly diverging industries and contexts. We get bored if we don't. We hate being limited by our own experience, and bristle at somebody else's perception of what we're equipped to do. Because of this, we struggle to capture in words what a designer is and does across all these disparate silos and roles.

There is a word for someone who refuses to be pigeonholed—happily choosing to be broad instead of deep. The word is generalist.

DESIGN HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE THE SINGLE MOST POWERFUL, RELEVANT AND RESTORATIVE PROCESS FOR CHANGE KNOWN TO HUMANKIND.

At the new MFA Design for Social Innovation program at SVA, I am on a quest for young designers interested in social innovation, and one of the inviolate qualifications is that they be generalists—within design, and well outside of it. The most effective social innovators are generalists—they see systems that are invisible to experts. For example, it would be easy to think of global development pioneer Paul Polak as an expert in alleviating poverty, but he has been successful at that because he's also a shrink, an inventor, an entrepreneur, a writer, a researcher and a self-made engineer. Polak is a generalist of the highest order.

A Chinese proverb tells us that "the beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right name", but generalist isn't such a wise-sounding name for us. It's a dismissive description denoting a dabbler in a culture that rewards expertise and an economy that rewards hierarchies. We respect the titles, the rank, the power that comes from the top.

WHAT TO DO

In creating a new future, the most important first step is to imagine the desired end state. And then to be as fluid, creative and adaptive as needed to get there, noticing the inchoate relationships and opportunities as they present themselves, building on them to create a new restorative order.

Traditionally, designers have been regarded as makers of things, translators of strategies and information, rather than creators of transformation and intentional outcomes. But that is changing.

Design has the potential to be the single most powerful, relevant and restorative process for change known to humankind. Design can be the methodology that integrates and scales the millions of initiatives already underway, that aligns diverse communities around a shared vision when they need to work together but don't know how, making invisible dynamics visible, enabling enlightened businesses to grow and thrive. And not least, design has the capacity to invite, motivate, engage, entertain and delight people, moving them to action, inspiring them to believe that something better is possible. It is a vision in which designers are the leaders we need now.

When photography began, technology was challenging. Making a good photograph was the ability to make a photograph at all. Today, a successful professional photographer requires diverse talent and experience, and technology is only the beginning. How much of photo journalist James Nachtwey's brilliance can be attributed to his technical skill, and how much depends on the life, perspective, vision, wisdom and bravery that feeds it? It's time for design to evolve from working on parts, time to put the parts together into something whole.

HOW TO DO IT

Refuse to be labeled by design thinking. Acknowledge and take responsibility for the full range of functions that design plays in the process of change and transformation and learn to use them as a system.

- Design requires approaching a situation with an open mind, free of preconceived answers, which sounds simple but is not. It includes mapping and modeling—illustrating relationships, making hidden connections explicit. Making things visual enables people with different ethos to see the same thing, unseen truths and insights are revealed.

- Design creates the tools required to understand information, to compare and experiment, providing access to learning.

- Design involves play, putting restrictions aside, imagining, waking up hopeful every day because it is always possible to create something new. Being unreasonable when being reasonable will not suffice; loving the pain and accepting the insecurity of not knowing the answer.

- Design is prototyping—making things without being attached to them, hearing what's wrong, building again on what's right.

- Design is craft—creating beauty, elegance, refinement that touches and satisfies, and that becomes embedded in people's daily lives.

- Design is continually learning and fixing. It's working iteratively and remaining awake to the evolution that needs to take place.

Be the translator. Because generalists see issues from multiple perspectives, it's easy to assume that what's obvious to them is obvious to everyone. Don't assume that.

Help business to change. A recent study by LRN revealed stunning gulfs between the way c-suite executives perceive the culture within their organizations and the way the rest of the company perceives it. It severely limits the organization's ability to evolve. That gap in understanding uncovers a need and an opportunity for design. Business is where we work, business executives are who we know. It's where to begin.

Facilitate change in unexpected places. Everything that can be improved upon is an opportunity for design, beginning with conversations. Maggie Breslin, a designer who worked at the Mayo Clinic for years, is a great believer in the design of conversations: "I see enormous opportunity for design in health care to create the spaces for doctors/providers and patients to have difficult conversations. I think those difficult conversations are the key to developing a health care system that is less expensive, of higher quality and more efficient; in short, everything we say we want the health care system to be."

Create meaning. It's not the economy, stupid. It's the stupid economy. Ours is alarmingly one dimensional, which is why it's so fragile and unrewarding. The value that can be measured by more than money is the purview of design. In fact, MFA Design for Social Innovation faculty member Lee-Sean Huang says that "one definition of a designer is someone who creates meaning."

David Remnick, editor in chief of the New Yorker, wrote an article sometime in the early aughts—when we had begun to see our current wars and networked downturns emerge. He said that in the decade or so before, we thought we had escaped history; thought we had learned from the past and evolved to the point where we could avoid the old, devastating mistakes. But of course, we didn't. We evolve, it seems, and still we keep forgetting the lessons that would help us achieve a state of existence good for everyone rather than only a few. And David Abrams, in "The Spell of the Sensuous" reminds us that indigenous people without written language see time in circles, instead of in a line. It is our written history—the recording of one event after another, fixed on a date that will never return—that creates an experience of time as something linear, with a linear expectation of progress, appropriate for a mechanistic view of the world but missing the cyclical rhythms of living nature.

The design process is more like the indigenous experience of time: one circle of learning, seeing, creating, making and learning again, always with the potential to conceive a fresh new beginning around the bend – one more aspect of what design can bring to our world.

TO FULFILL DESIGN'S PROMISE, THE MOST IMPORTANT SHIFT WE NEED TO MAKE IS LETTING GO OF THE ENTRENCHED MENTAL MODEL OF DESIGN AS THE POINT OF ITSELF; AS THE END PRODUCT RATHER THAN AS A MEANS TO SOMETHING GREATER.

DESIGN NOW

In a review of an architectural project he called a "Social Cathedral," Michael Kimmelman wrote, "Sculpture is always closer than architecture to pure form, being mostly liberated from all the obvious constraints (environmental, economic, technological and political) that shape any building's design. Architecture is a contaminated art in this sense, but that is also a virtue. It is social art."

Design, like architecture, is a contaminated art—contaminated by the restraints of its inescapable role in our society. Those restraints are its potential, and its calling to be more than its parts.

In 1990, I turned down a partnership at Pentagram because I felt it constricted me to be labeled a designer. I saw design at the time as making a pretty much prescribed set of artifacts that one could improve upon but not easily redefine. Either I was dead wrong at the time, or design has finally become big enough to hold the ambitions of all of us malcontents and generalists. But, what's clear is that the time has come to snatch design out of the mouths of those who have defined it for us, to seize this moment and make it all that we know it can be.

To fulfill design's promise, the most important shift we need to make is letting go of the entrenched mental model of design as the point of itself; as the end product rather than as a means to something greater.

Makers are justifiably proud of what they make, and can come to view the artifact as the answer. There is a tendency to view the site, the poster, the logo or the product as the purpose of design when it is not. We will only make design a force in creating the future if we see it not as an end in itself, but as a tool, a medium, a lever in a process of ongoing transformation. And if we take full responsibility for the transformation we engender. "What will we accomplish with this?" is the question we must never forget ask, and to honestly answer. That will be the work of the designer of the future. HOW

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