



Citizen Designer

perspectives
on design
responsibility

edited by 

Steven Heller & Véronique Vienne

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Perspectives on Design Responsibility

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Introduction

Steven Heller



Milton Glaser often says, “Good design is good citizenship.” But does this mean making good design is an indispensable obligation to the society and culture in which designers are citizens? Or does it suggest that design has inherent properties that when applied in a responsible manner contribute to a well-being that enhances everyone’s life as a citizen?

For the answer we must also ask the questions: What is good design? Is it rightness of form or aesthetic perfections? Is it flawless conception or intelligent usability? The converse, bad or poor design is design that doesn’t work. So, is bad design bad citizenship? In fact, bad design is just plain mean while good design presumably serves many citizens.

Nonetheless, “goodness” is subjective and one can be a good (or great) designer without necessarily being a good citizen. But if good design (regardless of style or mannerism) adds value to society, by either pushing the cultural envelope of maintaining the status quo at a high level, then design and citizenship must go hand in hand.

Thomas Watson Jr. said, “Good design is good business.” When the former IBM chairman and leading American corporate design patron proclaimed this in the fifties, business was the white knight of postwar American society. Yet during the subsequent years, good business has not always been good business, and good design has sometimes unwittingly supported bad companies. Business malfeasance is all too common these days. For example, having risen to the level of tragic-comedy, Enron’s shenanigans were the apotheosis of corporate wrong-doing in the year 2002. During the process of spiraling into the abyss, Enron’s design—specifically the Enron logo created by Paul Rand in 1996—became the MGM (Money Grabbing Mongrels) lion of greed and corruption. Rand’s mark was created to bond Enron’s workforce to the corporate culture while branding the company’s positive assets on the nation’s consciousness. In the modernist tradition, graphic design was employed to foster

professionalism, and in this instance Enron's mark helped unify the chaos of its sprawling business. At the time, there was no hint that Enron's leaders would defraud employees or investors; in fact, just the opposite. As a new energy conglomerate it assured jobs for thousands and services to millions. Good design underscored the promise of good business, and, by extension, good citizenship. But when Enron started to rot from the inside the logo became an icon of decay.

So, what is the responsibility of a designer when design is impeccable but the client is gained? Being accountable to some moral standard is the key. A designer must be professionally, culturally, and socially responsible for the impact his or her design has on the citizenry. Indeed, every good citizen must understand that his or her respective actions will have reactions. All individual acts, including the creation and manufacture of design for a client, exert impact on others. But Rand could not foresee Enron's gross betrayal. And even if large corporations are sometimes suspect, why should he or any designer refuse to work for Enron or any similar establishment? A designer cannot afford to hire investigators to compile dossiers about whether a business is savory or not. Yet certain benchmarks must apply, such as knowing what, in fact, a company does and how it does it. And if a designer has any doubts, plenty of public records exist that provide for informed decisions. However, each designer must address this aspect of good citizenship as he or she sees fit.

Two years ago, when Milton Glaser was illustrating Dante's Purgatory, he became interested in the "Road to Hell" and developed a little questionnaire to see where he stood in terms of his own willingness to lie. Beginning with fairly minor misdemeanors, the following twelve steps increase to some major indiscretions.

1. Designing a package to look bigger on the shelf.
2. Designing an ad for a slow, boring film to make it seem like a light-hearted comedy.
3. Designing a crest for a new vineyard to suggest that it has been in business for a long time.
4. Designing a jacket for a book whose sexual content you find personally repellent.
5. Designing a medal using steel from the World Trade Center to be sold as a profit-making souvenir of September 11.
6. Designing an advertising campaign for a company with a history of known discrimination in minority hiring.
7. Designing a package for children whose content you know are low in nutrition value and high in sugar content.
8. Designing a line of T-shirts for a manufacturer that employs child labor.

9. Designing a promotion for a diet product that you know doesn't work.
10. Designing an ad for a political candidate whose policies you believe would be harmful to the general public.
11. Designing a brochure for an SUV that turned over frequently in emergency conditions and was known to have killed 150 people.
12. Designing an ad for a product whose frequent use could result in the user's death.

A dozen additional steps of varied consequence should be added, but Glaser's list addresses a significant range of contentious issues. Designers are called upon to make routine decisions regarding scale, color, image, etc.—things that may seem insignificant but will inevitably affect behavior in some way. An elegant logo can legitimize the illegitimate; a beautiful package can spike up the sales of an inferior product; an appealing trade character can convince kids that something dangerous is essential. The graphic designer is as accountable as the marketing and publicity departments for the propagation of a message or idea.

Talented designers are predisposed to create good-looking work. We are taught to marry type and image into pleasing and effective compositions that attract the eye and excite the senses. Do this well, we're told, and good jobs are plentiful; do it poorly and we'll produce junk mail for the rest of our lives. However, to be what in this book we call a "citizen designer" requires more than talent. As Glaser notes, the key is to ask questions, for the answers will result in responsible decisions. Without responsibility, talent is too easily wasted on waste.

This book examines and critiques through essays and interviews three areas in which designers practice and in which responsibility to oneself and society is essential. Sections on Social Responsibility, Professional Responsibility, and Artistic Responsibility offer insight into how our peers view their practices as dependent on moral codes. The final part, Raves and Rants, is a soapbox, pure and simple. Our goal in editing this book is not to offer dogmatic decrees or sanctimonious screeds but to address the concern that the design field, like society as a whole, is built on the foundation of... well, you fill in the blank.





part i

social
responsibility



Good Citizenship

Design as a Social and Political Force

Katherine McCoy



This decade finds us in a crisis of values in the United States. Our increasingly multicultural society is experiencing a breakdown in shared values—national values, tribal values, personal values, even family values—consensual motivating values that create a common sense of purpose in a community.

The question is: How can a heterogeneous society develop shared values and yet encourage cultural diversity and personal freedom? Designers and design education are part of the problem and can be part of the answer. We cannot afford to be passive anymore. Designers must be good citizens and participate in the shaping of our government and society. As designers, we could use our particular talents and skills to encourage others to wake up and participate as well.

Before the U.S. congratulates itself too much on the demise of Communism, we must remember that our American capitalist democracy is not what it used to be, either. Much of our stagnation comes from this breakdown of values. Entrepreneurial energy and an optimistic work ethic have deteriorated into individual self-interest, complacency, corporate freedom, and resentment between ethnic groups and economic classes. Our traditional common American purpose is fading—that sense of building something new where individuals could progress through participating in a system that provided opportunity. Consumerism and materialism now seem to be the only ties that bind. The one group that seems to be bound by more than this is the Far Right; but their bond is regressive, a desire to force fundamentalist prescriptive values on the rest of us.

In the Reagan-Bush era we were told it was all O.K., that we could spend and consume with no price tag attached. During this period, graphic designers enjoyed the spinals of artificial prosperity with the same passive hedonism as the rest of

the country. Now we are beginning to realize it was not all O.K. The earth is being poisoned, its resources depleted, and the U.S. has gone from a creditor to a debtor nation. Our self-absorption and lack of activism has left a void filled by minority single-issue groups aggressively pushing their concerns.

There are serious threats to our civil liberties in the United States from both fundamentalist censorship of the Right and political correctness from the Left. We have seen the dismemberment of artistic freedom at the National Endowment for the Arts in recent years, and aggressive attempts to censor public schools' teaching—from Darwin to Hemingway to safe sex—continue. A conservative Congress continues to push for content restrictions on Internet discourse. And as graphic designers specializing in visual communications, the content of our communications could be seriously curtailed if we do not defend our freedom of expression.

But even more troubling is our field's own self-censorship. How many graphic designers today would feel a loss if their freedom of expression were handcuffed? Most of our colleagues never expertise their right to communicate on public issues or potentially controversial content. Remove our freedom of speech and graphic designers might never notice. We have trained a profession that feels political or social concerns are extraneous to our work, or inappropriate.

Thinking back to 1968, the atmosphere at Unimark International during my first year of work typified this problem. Unimark (an idealistic international design office with Massimo Vignelli and Jay Doblin as vice presidents and Herbert Bayer on the board) was dedicated to the ideal of the rationally objective professional. The graphic design was to be the neutral transmitter of the client's messages. Clarity and objectivity were the goal. During that year, the designers I worked with, save one notable exception, were all remarkably disinterested in the social and political upheavals taking place around us. Vietnam was escalating with body counts touted on every evening newscast; the New Left rioted before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago; Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; and Detroit was still smoking from its riots just down the street from our office. Yet hardly a word was spoken on these subjects. We were encouraged to wear white lab coats, perhaps so the messy external environment would not contaminate our surgically clean detachment.

These white lab coats make an excellent metaphor for the apolitical designer, cherishing the myth of universal, value-free design—that design is a clinical process akin to chemistry, scientifically pure and neutral, conducted in a sterile laboratory environment with precisely predictable results. Yet Lawrence and Oppenheimer

and a thousand other examples teach us that even chemists and physicists must have a contextual view of their work in the socio-political world around them.

During that time, I became increasingly interested in the social idealism of the times; the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam peace movement, the anti-materialism and social experimentation of the New Left, and radical feminism. Yet it was very difficult to relate these new ideas to the design that I was practicing and the communication process that I loved so much. Or perhaps the difficulty was not the values of design so much as the values of the design community. About all I could connect with was designing and sending (to appalled family members) an anti-Vietnam, feminist Christmas card and sold-screening T-shirts with a geometricized “Swiss” version of the feminist symbol. Meanwhile, we continued to serve the corporate and advertising worlds with highly “professional” design solutions.

The implication of the word “professional” as we use it is indicative of the problem here. How often do we hear, “Act like a professional” or, “I’m a professional, I can handle it?” Being a professional means to put aside one’s personal reactions regardless of the situation and to carry on. Prostitutes, practitioners of the so-called oldest profession, must maintain an extreme of cool objectivity about this most intimate of human activities, highly disciplining their personal responses to deliver an impartial and consistent product to their clients.

This ideal of the dispassionate professional distances us from ethical and political values. Think of the words used to describe the disciplined, objective professional, whether it be scientist, doctor, or lawyer: “impartial,” “dispassionate,” “disinterested.” These become pejorative terms in a difficult world crying for compassion, interest, concern, commitment, and involvement. Disinterest is appropriate for a neutral arbitrator but not for an advocate. In fact, design education most often trains students to think of themselves as passive arbitrators of the message between the client/sender and audience/receiver, rather than as advocates for the message content or the audience. Here is the challenge: how to achieve the objectivity and consistency of professionalism without stripping oneself of personal convictions.

Our concept of graphic design professionalism has been largely shaped, and generally for the better, by the legacy of twentieth-century modernism as it has come to us through the Bauhaus and Swiss lineages. However, there are several dominant aspects of this modernist ethic that have done much to distance designers from their cultural milieu. The ideals, forms, methods, and mythology of modernism are a large part of this problem of detachments, including the paradigms of universal

form, abstraction, self-referentialism, value-free design, rationality, and objectivity.

Objective rationalism, particularly that of the Bauhaus, provided a much needed antidote to the sentimentality and gratuitous eclecticism found in nineteenth-century mass production, visual communications, and architecture. Linked to functionalism, objective analysis formed the basis of problem-solving methods to generate functional design solutions to improve the quality of daily life. Expanded more recently to include systems design, this attitude has done much to elevate the quality of design thinking.

Linked to the ideal of the objective, clear-sighted designer is the ideal of value-free universal forms. Perhaps a reaction to the frequent political upheavals between European nations, especially World War I, early-modern designers hoped to find internationalist design forms and attitudes that would cross those national, ethnic, and class barriers that had caused such strife. In addition, a universal design—one design for all—would be appropriate for the classless mass society of industrial workers envisioned by early-twentieth-century social reformers.

But passing years and different national contexts have brought different results from the application of these modernist design paradigms. The myth of objectivity unfortunately does much to disengage the designer from compassionate concerns. Strongly held personal convictions would seem to be inappropriate for the professional. Functionalism is narrowly defined in measurable headed, objective utilitarian terms. Too often this means serving the client's definition of function—generally profits—over other concerns, including safety, the environment, and social/cultural/political impacts. Universalism has brought us the homogenized proper corporate style based mainly on Helvetica and the grid, ignoring the power and potential of regional, idiosyncratic, personal, or culturally specific stylistic vocabularies. And the ideal of value-free design is a dangerous myth. In fact, all design solutions carry a bias, either explicit or implicit. The more honest designs acknowledge their biases openly rather than manipulate their audiences with assurances of universal “truth” and purity.

Abstraction, modernism's revolutionary contribution to the visual language of art and design, further distances both designer and audience from involvement. Stripped of imagery, self-referential abstraction is largely devoid of symbols and disconnected from experience in the surrounding world, cool and low on emotion. Abstraction is predictable in application—polite, inoffensive, and not too meaningful—thereby providing a safe vocabulary for corporate materials. Imagery, on the other hand, is richly loaded with symbolic, encoded meaning capable of arousing the entire range of human emotions. Imagery is difficult to control, even

dangerous or controversial—often leading to unintended personal interpretations on the part of the audience—but also poetic, powerful, and potentially eloquent.

The modernist agenda has conspired to promote an attitude of apoliticism among American designers, design educators, and students, building on the pragmatic American tendency to avoid political dialectics. American designers consistently take European theories and strip them of their political content. Of the various strains of modernism, many of which were socially concerned or politically revolutionary, American design either chose those most devoid of political content or stripped the theories of their original political idealism.

More recently we have seen a strong interest in French literary theory. But its original element of French contemporary Marxism has been largely ignored in the U.S., perhaps rightly so. The American political environment is far different from the European; European political dialectics may not be appropriate to us. Yet we cannot assume that no political theory is needed to ground our work—all designers need an appropriate framework to evaluate and assess the impacts of their work with its social/ethical/political milieu. Perhaps this evaluative framework is different for each individual, dependent on the values of each, reflecting the strong tradition of American individualism.

Designers must break out of the obedient, neutral servant-to-industry mentality, an orientation that was particularly strong in the Reagan-Thatcher-Bush years, and continues to dominate design management and strategic design. Yes, we are problem-solvers responding to the needs of clients. But we must consider the problems we take on. Should one help sell tobacco and alcohol, or design a Presidential memorial library for a man who reads only pulp cowboy novels? Does society really benefit from a strategic plan for plastic housewares or fast-food? The answers may be more subtle than a yes or no. But one thing is clear: Design is not a neutral, value-free process. A design has no more integrity than its purpose or subject matter. Garbage in, garbage out. The most rarefied design solution can never surpass the quality of its content.

A dangerous assumption is that corporate work of innocuous content is devoid of political bias. The vast majority of student design projects deal with corporate needs, placing a heavy priority on the corporate economic sector of our society. Commerce is where we are investing our assets of time, budgets, skills, and creativity. This is a decisive vote for economics over other potential concerns, including social, educational, cultural, spiritual, and political needs. This is a political statement in itself both in education and practice.

Postwar American art has greatly ignored societal issues as well. The self-

reference of abstract expressionism and minimalism has been largely divorced from external conditions. Pop art embraced materialism more than it critiqued it. The more recent postmodernist ironic parodies have been full of duplicity and offer no program as antidote to the appalling paradigms they deconstruct. But the past several years have brought a new involvement by artists in the socio-political environment around them. A recent book, *The Reenchantment of Art*, advocated a second postmodernism, a reconstruction that moves beyond the detachment of modernism and deconstruction. Suzi Gablik, the author, calls for an end to the alienation of artists and aesthetics from social values in a new interrelational, audience-oriented art.

There are signs that this is happening. Issue-oriented art has been spreading like wildfire among graduate students in the fine arts. At Cranbrook and a number of other design programs, fine arts students are attending graphic design critiques, eager to learn design methods for reaching their audiences. Fashion advertising is beginning to occasionally embrace issues. Perhaps humanistic content is good for sales: witness Esprit, Benetton, Moschino. That these clients are prepared to make social advocacy part of their message is evidence of a need and receptivity in their audiences. But are many graphic designers prepared to deal with this type of content? Graphic design is a powerful tool, capable of informing, publicizing, and propagandizing social, environmental, and political messages as well as commercial ones.

How does compassionate design shape a practice? The occasional pro bono piece as a relief from business as usual is not the answer here. The choice of clients or content is crucial. The most fortunate can find a worthy cause in need of a designer with the funds to pay for professional design services. Unfortunately, good causes often seem to have the least resources in our present economic system. Is it possible to shape a practice around non-business clients or introduce social content into commercial work? The compassionate designer must strategize an ethical practice and be an informed, involved citizen in a Jeffersonian participatory democracy, agile and flexible, prepared to turn the tools of visual communications toward a broad spectrum of needs.

How does one educate graphic design students with an understanding of design as a social and political force? Can a political consciousness be trained? Can an educator teach values? The answer is probably no in the simplistic sense. However, the field of education has a well-developed area referred to as “values clarification” that offers many possibilities for graphic design educators. Too often we take individuals with eighteen years of experience and strip them of their values,

rather than cultivate them for effective application in design practice.

In teaching, these issues must be raised from the beginning for the design student. This is not something to spring on the advanced student after their attitudes have been fixed on neutrality. At the core of this issue is the content of the projects we assign from the very first introductory exercise. Most introductory graphic design courses are based on abstract formal exercises inherited from the Bauhaus and the classic Basel school projects. The detachment problem begins here. These projects either deal with completely abstract form—point, line, and plane, for instance—or they remove imagery from context. The graphic translation projects so effective in training a keen formal sense unfortunately use a process of abstractional analysis, thereby stripping imagery of its encoded symbolism. (I have to admit to being guilty of this in my assignments in past years.) Divorcing design form from content or context is a lesson in passivity, implying that graphic form is something separate and unrelated to subjective values or even ideas. The first principle is that all graphic projects must have content.

The type of content in each assignment is crucial. It is disheartening to see the vast number of undergraduate projects dedicated to selling goods and services in the marketplace devoid of any mission beyond business success. Undoubtedly all students need experience in this type of message and purpose. But cannot projects cover a broad mix of content, including issues beyond business? Cultural, social, and political subjects make excellent communications challenges for student designers.

Project assignments can require content developed by the student dealing with public and personal social, political, and economic issues and current events. The responsibility for developing content is a crucial one; it counteracts the passive design role in which one unquestioningly accepts client-dictated copy. On a practical level, we know how frequently all designers modify and improve client copywriting; many graphic designers become quite good writers and editors, so closely is our function allied to writing. In a larger sense, however, self-developed content and copy promotes two important attitudes in a design student. One is the ability to develop personal content and subject matter, executed independently of the client's assignments, where the reward is the expression of personal concerns. Secondly, the challenge to develop subject matter stimulates the design student to determine what matters on a personal level. A process of values clarification must go on in the student before a subject or subject-matter position can be chosen. And the breadth of concerns chosen as subjects by fellow students exposes each student to a wider range of possibilities.

The critique process for issue-oriented work can be a very effective forum

for values clarification. This is particularly true of group critiques in which all students are encouraged to participate, rather than the authoritarian traditionalist crit in which the faculty do all the talking. In evaluating the success or failure of a piece of graphic communications, each critic must address the subject matter and understand the student's stated intentions before weighing a piece's success. This expands the critique discussion beyond the usual and necessary topics of graphic method, form, and technique. Tolerance as well as objectivity are required of each critique participant, in that they must accept and understand the student's intended message before evaluating the piece.

For instance, two fundamentalist Christian students recently brought their religiously oriented work to Cranbrook graphic design crits during a two-semester period. It was a challenge—and a lesson in tolerance—for the other students to put aside their personal religious (or non religious) conviction in order to give these students and their work a fair critique from a level playing field. It was quite remarkable—and refreshing—to find us all discussing spirituality as legitimate subject matter. This has held true for many other subjects from the universe of issues facing our culture today, including local and global environmental issues, animal rights, homelessness, feminism, and reproductive choice.

The point here is content. As design educators, we cast projects almost as a scientist designs a laboratory experiment. The formula and the variables conspire to slant the results in one direction or another. The project assignment and the project critique are powerful tools that teach far more than explicit goals, and carry strong implicit messages about design and designers' roles.

Design history also offers a rich resource for understanding the relationship of form and content to socio-political contexts. We all know how often works from and design history are venerated (and imitated) in an atmosphere divorced from their original context. By exploring the accompanying cultural/social/political histories, students can see the contextual interdependencies and make analogies to their present time.

Am I advocating the production of a generation of designers preoccupied with political activism, a kind of reborn sixties mentality? I think rather what I have in mind is nurturing a crop of active citizens—informed, concerned participants in society who happen to be graphic designers. We must stop inadvertently training our students to ignore their convictions and be passive economic servants. Instead, we must help them to clarify their personal values and to give them the tools to recognize when it is appropriate to act on them. I do think this is possible. We still need objectivity, but this includes the objectivity to know when to invoke personal

biases and when to set them aside. Too often our graduates and their work emerge as charming mannequins, voiceless mouthpieces for the messages of ventriloquist clients. Let us instead give designers their voices so they may participate and contribute more fully in the world around them.

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