

The Design Age

Design is the new black! Design isn't everything, it's the only thing. Design your home. Design your life. Design your world. What could be more optimistic than this unbounded aspect? Italo Calvino, a genius of all things fantastic, personified this spirit. Calvino's design project was the subtraction of weight, but for him lightness went with precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard. In his prescient way, he was designing a better world.

Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification.

Nineteen years after Calvino's passing, design and enterprise are in explosive convergence. Design is fermenting a revolution in radical optimism. Backed by the force of business, the design trade just graduated. It will practice the design of a better world. For 6.4 billion people.

The revolution's antecedents are wonderfully Italian. From Fellini to Ferrari, Italy has always understood design, passion and the optimism that lives in the aesthetic. This is why Italians are ghostbusters. Got a design problem? Dial +39.

It's taken a while, but the rest of the world is catching on. The new momentum has much to do with the march of commodification – the mass cloning of look and feel - and a transfer of power to you and me, the consumer. Design today has never been more accessible. From iPod to Spinbrush, it's now design for everyone, and that includes other species. There are books on feng sui for pets. There are mobile phones for dogs. As there should be.

The local school on a fundraiser? Design a poster on Photoshop. Any of the kids can do it. Even some parents. Don't like history, can't do math? Go enrol in a design course. Graphics, fashion, photography - one of the fastest

growing education sectors in the world. We're in what's been called the 'Era of Conspicuous Design'.

Scale is not an issue. Having trouble attracting tourists? Redesign your inner city like Bilbao did with Frank Gehry's Guggenheim masterpiece. Need to renovate Beijing? Get me Paul Andreu. And while you're about it, Rem Koolhaas.

For producers of all things, design has become the solution *du jour*, and in today's commodity blizzard you don't need rocket science to see why. Would you rather be seen as a clone of Agent Smith or as Neo soaring above the Matrix? No wonder top designers are now the super heroes of low concept culture. Hussein Chalayan and Clements Ribeiro in the UK's Topshop. Michael Graves, Todd Oldham and Isaac Mizrahi in Target. Karl Lagerfeld in Hennes & Mauritz. Philippe Starke and Marc Newson everywhere.

Then there's the car guys. The rock stars of the design world. Same charisma, same status – same hair. Their concept cars at auto shows are like couture creations. Impractical and inspiring, unavailable and irresistible.

Toyota nailed quality, durability, and reliability while the rest of the fleet were greasing their wrenches. Toyota's race to win 15% of the global market by 2010 will be engineered by their legendary production systems. But most influentially it will be designed. In the car game today, looks beat brains (every car has these). A car without mysterious art, sensual lines and intimate touch is going nowhere fast.

Masao Inoue, Chief Engineer of the stunning gas-electric Toyota Prius: "Now, noise can be measured by figures, but there is also a quietness that you feel with your body.... We need to be able to feel the quietness or feel good about the acceleration as we actually experience it in the car."

Wherever you look now, including packaged goods, design is hot. Procter & Gamble have appointed a VP of design. They have a strategy and a process. And they have a CEO, A G Lafley, who gets it.

Management guru Tom Peters lays down the new imperative: "Design is so critical that it should be on

the agenda (along with a professional designer) of every meeting in every single department.”

The risk that design faces, like everything, is commodification. A handful of great designers and a tsunami of design-savvy consumers. Design is at risk of being taken for granted. Included in everything and meaning nothing.

The solution? Turn up the heat. Pull back on “form follows function”. As the founder of FrogDesign Hartmut Esslinger did, take the straps off “form follows emotion”. Cut emotion loose and let it rip.

Emotion is an unlimited resource with unlimited power. By streaming the power of emotion, design can be an extraordinary force for good. The *Massive Change* Project by Bruce Mau Design and the Institute without Boundaries is right on track. The future of design is the aesthetics of capacity, not of form. Let the cynics howl. An optimist believes she can achieve extraordinary things. A pessimist is someone who's afraid she's right!

Why does Mau matter? He has the courage to inspire others to make a difference. He sees the richness of the marketplace. The shift from design trade to design economies is a slam dunk. The *Massive Change* banners drip with optimism: “It is not about the world of design. It is about the design of the world.”

Massive Change makes human welfare a design project, a practical objective. I love this because it puts sustainability at the centre of design practice. It brings into play the four profit lines I see for enterprise:

1. Create a Winning Zone. Economic sustainability.
2. Protect Planet Home. Environmental sustainability.
3. Build a Family of One. Social sustainability.
4. Nurture a World for Many. Cultural sustainability.

The challenge for *Massive Change* is to make its practical objective a delivered reality. This means connecting the ideals within design and sustainability with the consumer-focus of business. Italo Calvino grounded “lightness” with a Paul Valéry quote: “One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather.”

This is about a Dream, a Challenge and a Focus. To Peak Perform you need all three. Challenge is the dream in action. Focus is the dream given a deadline. Achieve a result - in the next 100 days, this week, this day, this hour, this second. Steve Jobs of Apple Computers sums up: “Real artists ship.”

How to make a difference on a global scale? As *Massive Change* contemplates, through ideas in collaboration. Through synthesis. Through hybrid synergy like the Toyota Prius. Innovation is about the number of connections you make among people and their ideas. It is about networks and fields of influence that change consumer lives. Steve Jobs again: “Creativity is just connecting things.”

Today the latest, hottest ideas blend technologies from Bangalore to Seoul. Material ConneXion in Manhattan and Milan is a cool design shop example. It’s a matchmaker that hooks up designers with manufacturers of new materials that inspire product break-throughs - like the woven netting on the Air Jordan XIX basketball shoe.

Samsung and P&G are scale examples. A.G. Lafley shook the P&G innovation cage with “Connect and Develop”, connecting experts on unrelated brands to inspire new products. Karl Ronn, vice president of P&G’s home-care division: “Innovation nowadays is more like improvisation in jazz than playing out a score that’s already written.”

The Age of Knowledge is over – we’re saturated in the stuff. We live in the Age of the Idea. What counts now is ideas-led innovation, tangible ideas that connect with scale and velocity. We call this Fahrenheit 212, the moment when ordinary water becomes energized steam. A crucible where ideas, design, strategy and marketing get it on in real time. A

furnace where disconnected elements connect to actualize new platforms, new solutions, new dreams.

Recently I was invited to Fabrica, Benetton's Research and Development Communication Centre in Ponzano (the most inspirational environment I've ever seen) and to Liz Claiborne Designers' Roundtable in New York. I suggested to tomorrow's designers that design means bringing to light emotional meaning. That designers are the voice of the consumer. And that in our fragile world, the voice is growing loud. The voice seeks inspiration, the design of a better world. Nothing less. This is the supersensory role design was born to play.

My personal design of an inclusive future is through Lovemarks. It is a new future beyond brands inspired by mystery, sensuality and intimacy. From ritual of story, evocation of sense and harvesting of dreams through to gesture of empathy and symbol of passion.

Manolo Blahnik said: "Half my designs are controlled fantasy, 15 percent are total madness and the rest are bread-and-butter." Perfect.

Here are five thoughts to help us fly like Perseus.

1. On average, a 4-year-old child asks 437 questions a day
2. Napoleon made his battle plans in a sandbox.
3. Plastic lawn flamingos outnumber real flamingos in the U.S.A
4. More than 2, 500 left-handed people are killed every year from using right handed products
5. A duck's quack doesn't echo, and no one knows why!!!

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Book: Lovemarks: the Future Beyond Brands (powerhouse Books, New York, May 2004); Innovation in Communication Award:
www.saatchikevin.com/workingit/innovation_in_communication.html