

Teaching Design Standards in a Socially-Conscious Age

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Abstract:

In this essay, I reflect on a teaching experience that made me ask “what are the standards for good design in a socially conscious age?” My reflection describes an experience I had teaching engineering majors about what constitutes good design. I then compare that experience with another experience teaching graphic arts majors the practical aspects of graphic design. Through these experiences, I had an epiphany that good design establishes credibility, stimulates use and facilitates ease of use in a public context, includes the user, resonates with the culture of users, and sustains humanity or the environment. My reflection concludes with an explanation of each criterion.

Key Words:

graphic design; sustainability; social change; evaluation criteria; design education.

Introduction

I had an experience developing evaluation criteria for a design and social theory course that made me question: what the standards for good design in a socially conscious age are. Roughly half of the students in the class were engineering majors and the other half were majors of a multidisciplinary science and technology studies program in design innovation. My overall objective for these primarily engineering design students was to relay to them an understanding of how their personal values and society's values should be negotiated in the design process and reflected in its outcome. Rather than approaching design by studying the work of grand masters, we focused on the impact of design outcomes on society and the cultural factors that shape design and influence decision-making in the design process. In the midst of this experience, I had an epiphany: there is a lacuna in the standards for what constitutes good design in a socially conscious age.

Applied Design Programs

In applied programs, design students are taught to be master aestheticians. The ultimate goal of the design process is to yield an outcome that pleases the senses. In fact, Paul Rand (1997) – a founding father of graphic design, practitioner, and educator – clearly supports the primacy of aesthetics in design education:

To make the classroom a perpetual forum for political and social issues...is wrong; and to see aesthetics as sociology is grossly misleading. A student whose mind is cluttered with matters that have nothing directly to do with design...who is being overwhelmed with social problems and political issues is a bewildered student; this is not what he or she bargained for, nor, indeed, paid for. (p. 123)

Rand's strong bias in favor of aesthetics over social issues is a perspective that still resonates in many practice-based design programs in the United States. This perspective has yielded a core set of modernist learning outcomes centered around attaining aesthetically pleasing designs that promote companies and sell their products. However, as history shows, what designers also want to sell are ideas and products that address social issues and aim to change the world for the better.

Throughout the history of the United States, particularly in the sixties, we have seen graphic design used as a tool for social activism. In service to non-profit organizations and political groups, designers have created visual messages for community bulletin boards, transportation vehicles, billboards, advertisements, and other public spaces. Their designs visually translate their client's social advocacy messages into visual rhetoric that aim to persuade others to adopt a new attitude, way of thinking or acting, or conscience towards an unethical or environmentally damaging behavior. A quintessential example of the historical contributions designers have made to the promotion of humanitarian and environmental issues in society is that of the work of the late graphic designer Tibor Kalman who created, edited, and designed the magazine called *Colors* for Benetton, a magazine that advocated for various social issues including racism and AIDS/HIV. In each issue of *Colors*, Kalman advocated for a particular social cause through the use of images that were arresting, striking and persuasive.

Despite Rand's protest, socially-conscious design has permeated the walls of the design classroom where it has evolved into social change design as a result of the inclusion of research methodologies; and, design researchers and educators Jorge Frascara and Deitmar Winkler are well-known contributors to the inclusion of social issues and research in design pedagogy. In an essay titled "A History of Design. A History of Concerns," Frascara (2001) argues

I would hope that today, instead of trying to keep on inventing style superheroes in design shows, it would be refreshing to pay attention to social and cultural relevance, to the effectiveness of design solutions, and to the contributions that design makes to its highest possible function: supporting and fostering the welfare of people. (p.18)

The collective intellectual thrust of Frascara's work, the First Things First Manifestos of 1964 and 2000 and other core literature on the subject of socially conscious design –

e.g. Berman (2009) and Heller and Vienne (2003) – has created design courses across the many design sub-disciplines (including graphic design) focused on social-consciousness. But, it is the inclusion of these socially-conscious design courses at research universities that provides a catalyst for the evolution of socially-conscious design to social change design. Winkler (1997), a proponent of the inclusion of research in design pedagogy, argues

Looking at American design education, most schools curricula are rooted in the Bauhaus and its model of design with emphasis on formal aspects; hand and technical skills. Visualizing skills are still considered as most essential. This concentrated focus on visualization skills overshadows the student's intellectual and cognitive development. If design practice is to emerge as a recognized profession, it must overcome the barriers of the intellectually limiting Bauhaus model. Like other professions, it must begin to develop a strong information and knowledge base founded on contributions to a body of original research...The design practice must begin to recognize the need and to support the idea of research and testing. Design education must expand its...curricula to include cognitive studies and the introduction to research methodology and human, social and environmental factors." (p. 9)

Research in the design process is a means to an end (the end being social change) because it requires measuring and evaluating the effect of design outcomes and collaboration with the users of our designs and with representatives from other disciplines. The inclusion of research in the design process as a way to bring about social change requires a whole different set of evaluation criteria that builds on the strong foundation of aesthetics-focused teaching and learning developed by Rand and other predecessors. This, in essence, was the task I had given myself when I taught this social theory based course.

Developing standards to evaluate professional design outcomes in this course was different from my previous experiences deriving standards for design studio courses. My design studio courses tend to be less focused on the social impact of the design outcome and more concerned with formalities like aesthetic worth in relation to communication effectiveness. Whereas evaluation criteria in my design studio courses assess the formal qualities like the 'look and feel' of the design outcome, the evaluation criteria for the design and social theory course focused primarily on measuring the design outcome's degree of positive impact on society. As the Bauhaus was grounded in primarily visual appeal, the new socially conscious design movement underway is grounded in ethics and sustainability as evidenced through the writings of Nini (2004) and McDonough and Braungart (2002). Present day design outcomes reflect good design when they marry the ideologies of a modernist past to those of an ethical and sustainable present and future. To fully explain what constitutes good design in a socially conscious age, I looked holistically at the design's system of use – that is, the context in which the design problem originates, the design process, the design solution itself, and the context in which the design solution will be used; and, based on my observations of several exemplars, I hypothesized that design outcomes, in a socially conscious age, should meet the following professional standards:

- Establish credibility

- Stimulate use and facilitate ease of use in a public context
- Include the user
- Resonate with the culture of users
- Sustain humanity or the environment

Good design establishes credibility with the user

When a design outcome establishes credibility, it is professionally presented, ethical, and establishes trust with the user through its form and function. Multiple components and pages have a unified aesthetic and sequence respectively. The design outcome reflects good craft and professionalism in its presentation. The design uses the appropriate quality graphics for the context of use and reflects a high level of creativity and innovation. When text is a component in the design, the typographic treatment is readable and legible. An underlying grid is present and used effectively to present the information in an orderly way. There is a presence of hierarchy and contrast to organize information and guide the reader. The typographic treatment reflects an appropriate selection of fonts, point sizes, kerning, tracking, and leading. The information is sufficient, visually and verbally engaging, and accurate. The text- and image-based information is synthesized in the composition or form. When the designer has control over the text development and its editorial process, then the authored text also should be credible. Writing reflects credibility through a quality argument that is sufficient, interesting, accurate and positioned within an existing point of view. The author uses proper punctuation for text and citations; and, there are no spelling or grammatical errors. There are references to previous scholarship on the topic; and, supporting graphics are present and used effectively.

Good design stimulates use and facilitates ease of use in a public context

When a design stimulates use and facilitates ease of use, it is considered good design. A usable design is a viable, well-timed solution that can be implemented within a public context and coalesce with existing social and political frameworks. Within its public context, a design facilitates use by possessing a clearly communicated, welcoming, and accessible point of entry and a comprehensible system of navigating the information it presents. The interface of the design attracts attention and guides users through a hierarchy of functions. Ease of use is an uninhibited ability to access and interact with a tangible or intangible design and extract meaning. Its functionality is intuitive and requires little training beyond reading a brief manual. Interaction with the design effects pleasurable and memorable experiences. When people experience ease of use interacting with a design, then it is characterized as user-friendly. It communicates effectively. However, if people experience the opposite, that is, difficulty accessing or interacting with a design, then they become frustrated or are unable to extract meaning; and, communication fails.

Good design includes the user

A good design outcome comes from an iterative, collaborative process that is influenced by or inclusive of user input. Designers who conceptualize and develop their ideas in collaboration with their target users have a greater chance of their design outcomes resonating culturally with the audience. To include the user, the designer

should choose a user centered methodology, like those developed by Bennett (2006) and Matt Cooke in Noble and Bestley (2005) that engages the user in the design process from conception through to production. In the next decade, the fruits of design labor have the potential to improve society. However, society's ability to realize that potential will take the collective effort of both expert designers (engineer and graphic artist) and lay users regardless of nationality, gender, economic class, ethnicity, profession, culture, age and geographic location. For design to bring about social change effectively, both experts and lay users must participate equally in generating problems and innovating solutions. A designer can marry form and function with the intent to bring about social change. However, to do so requires a less intuitive and more user-centered design approach. And, for those who may not feel empowered with design agency or have access to design resources, technological innovation can be used to engender agency and facilitate access to those resources.

Good design resonates with the culture(s) of users

In addition to creating pleasurable and memorable experiences, design also has the potential to communicate meaning. Whether or not the design outcome reaches its potential depends on its inherent ability to speak effectively to the cultural idiosyncrasies (e.g. preferences for colors, symbols, language, navigation styles) of the target users. A design outcome communicates through culturally appropriate graphics that the expert designer chooses, in collaboration with the user, to resonate with the age, gender, ethnicity, context, socio-cultural and political values and visual and media literacy of its targeted users. When a design resonates with the culture(s) of users it uses culturally appropriate aesthetics that are gender-fair, age appropriate, multicultural and intellectually and technologically accessible.

Good design sustains humanity or the environment

What is the lifecycle of the design outcome? Does it reflect a cradle-to-cradle or cradle-to-grave approach? Does it contribute to the emission of greenhouse gases or does it sustain humanity and its environment? Has it been tested or evaluated in a public context? A good design outcome is disposable, recyclable, or adaptable to other uses. It reflects environmentally friendly choices. For instance, a good design outcome uses eco-friendly materials like soy inks or recycled paper and comes from an efficient and sustainable process. To be good, design has to embody both formal qualities and functionality that contributes to the sustenance of humanity or its environment.

Conclusion

The question of what constitutes good design has never been more pertinent. No longer should design be evaluated solely on its aesthetic appeal (based primarily on which grand master designed it) or arbitrary functionality. Design reaches its full potential to effect positive social change when it adheres to the aforementioned criteria that affirms that designers can be producers of new knowledge relevant to the needs of society. We are more than just visual translators of a client's knowledge. We can use our expertise to grapple with environmental, health and other social issues and proactively use our creative agency to change the world for the better.

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