NEED

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2010 STUDENT AWARDS

Designing the Future

Robert L. Peters, FGDC

Peters argues that designers with long-term vision, who embrace globalism and deploy sustainable practices, will play a key role in creating a blueprint for a better tomorrow.

Peters serves on the Advisory Board regarding design issues for Applied Arts Magazine.

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THE FUTURE

WE LIVE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES of tumultuous political, social, ecological and economic instability. We're told that nearly 50 per cent of world wealth has been destroyed by the "global financial crisis" within the past two years alone. Media reports of potential health pandemics trump the "normal" front-page news of the latest terrorist attacks, counterattacks and "unnatural" disasters seemingly triggered by a rapidly warming planet. Information overload, an overwhelming pace of change, imperilled eco-systems, and staggering social imbalances threaten our individual sense of purpose, place and well-being. Around the globe, wealth, health, knowledge and technological progress have never been shared equally—yet the awareness of these gaps between "haves" and "have-nots," along with a growing discernment of the underlying causes of these global inequities, have never been more apparent.

Massive data storage capabilities now outstrip our human ability to access meaningful information and distill knowledge: We are drowning in data. Social scientists reveal that the typical "white-collar worker" now encounters more than one million words per week and the average urban citizen of the "developed" world has more than 16,000 "brand encounters" every day. And human "targets" are subject to ever more invasive and coercive advertising—in schools, hospitals, doctors' offices, movie theatres, airport lounges, scenic lookouts, washrooms, elevators, on the Internet, mobile phones, fruit, public garbage cans, on bus wraps and via e-mail. Of the 200 billion e-mails sent daily, an estimated 90 per cent are spam.

Are we headed for a merciless state of total brand and advertising saturation? Will we even know if and when we've become overwhelmed?

The communications revolution of the past decades has redefined traditional notions of time and space, just as global trade and finance have dissolved international borders. Comprehension of how these rapid social and technological changes influence our fundamental relationship to community, the physical environment and a "sense of place" is not well understood. It seems we may be "driving beyond the beam of our headlights" as we rush headlong into an increasingly unknowable future.

An example of our increasing abstraction is vertical specialization—in ever-narrower terms of reference—a phenomenon affecting all professions, including graphic design. Sadly this tends to bring with it an erosion of the broader "whole-brain" thinking our species has enjoyed from strategists, visionaries and luminaries in the past, as well as the wisdom and holistic perspectives that "general practitioners" have traditionally brought to the table. Technology may have (arguably) made us stronger and faster, but it has not made us wiser.

Corporatism vs. the Commons

More than half of the world's top 100 economies are now corporations, as opposed to nations. Ninety-nine of the top 100 companies are headquartered in industrialized nations. Of the nearly 70,000 transnational corporations now operating worldwide, more than three-quarters are based in North America, Europe and Japan. Although the majority of these corporations enjoy identities, brands, marketing tools, communications and information systems developed by talented designers, there is a growing debate within the worldwide design community about the dual role that the profession plays in both creating wealth and serving society through the sharing of such wealth and the nurturing of culture.

A decade ago, Naomi Klein described a growing backlash against unbridled consumerism in her widely read book, *No Logo*. "The corporate

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hunger to homogenize our communities and monopolize public expression is creating a wave of public resistance," she wrote, documenting the reclaiming of public spaces and the revolt against corporate power. Many empathized with Klein's attack on "the brand bullies," and with Joel Balkan's depiction (in his book and film *The Corporation*) of corporations as "soulless leviathans—uncaring, impersonal and immoral," that are "using branding to create unique and attractive personalities for themselves." It's hard to dismiss the almost daily reports of small-town wars against "big-box retailers" (Wal-Mart, et al.), culture jamming, brand busting, and the growth of "hacktivism" and "digilantes," as an ever-more informed populace joins the fight of "citizenship vs. consumerism."

Globalism Bests Globalization

Globalization has been defined as the ever-more-rapid process by which corporations move their money, factories, products and brands around the planet in search of cheap labour, raw materials and governments willing to ignore consumer, worker and environmental protection laws. Largely unfettered by ethical or moral considerations, globalization tends to acquire and exploit the earth's resources for private gain, concentrate and centralize decision-making power, create dependency and impose demands of homogenization of almost everything on everybody.

Globalism stands in dramatic contrast to globalization, taking the viewpoint that all people share a single fragile planet (Marshall McLuhan's "global village," or what Buckminster Fuller referred to as "spaceship earth") that requires careful treatment and mutual respect by all concerned in order to survive and thrive. The concept of "Global Commons" is now used to describe the ozone layer, all land and oceans, and the

earth's rich genetic and cultural diversity. Like all ethical beliefs, globalism requires active practice in the day-to-day lives of the broadest possible constituency, with a view to fostering understanding, sharing resources on the basis of sustainability and equity, and coming together for mutual aid in times of need.

Everywhere in our shrinking world we can witness increased homogenization, erosion of indigenous culture, the emergence of non-places (uniform airports, generic shopping malls) and the advancement of what some call "serial monotony." Globalization threatens identity, the very cornerstone of culture, and the key to our understanding of "self." Culture encompasses language, traditions, beliefs, morals, laws, social behaviour and the art of a community—understanding and protecting its inherent integrity is imperative in avoiding identity crisis and rootlessness.

This shrinking world (with widened opportunities for designers in all disciplines) calls for extended vision, a broadened understanding of "the other" and an increased respect for our essential differences. Aware of the advancing threat of monoculture, can the world's designers help conserve and revive those things that make human culture distinct and unique? Is there still time to avoid losing our sense of who we are, where we've come from, where we belong and why these distinctions are so important?

Designers, more than most others, are in a position to actually celebrate societal differences, to embrace the vernacular and to help avoid the unhappy melding of unique cultures into a bland global stew. In the face of globalization's monolithic pressures to conform, I believe that designers with long-term vision, who embrace globalism and deploy sustainable practices, can truly create blueprints for a better future by becoming champions of the unique things that dignify human beings, that make our

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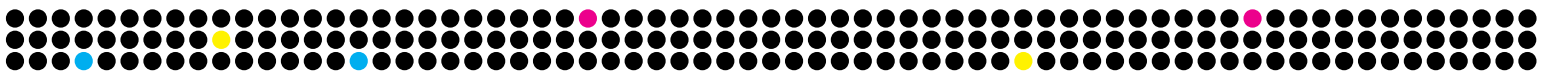
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civilizations meaningful and that make contemporary life worth living.

We know that in an age of information and ideas, communication and experience design have incredible strength to mold societal values and to influence thinking—essentially, they are the new currency in today's virtual world. As a result, designers play an increasingly vital role in empowering better decision-making, creating economic success, shaping communities and forming culture. Designers today have real power. As such, we also bear considerable responsibility for how things are consumed and how change is deployed.

It remains then for designers everywhere to envision worldwide solutions, to create integrative synergies, and to give form and life to universally equitable ideas. (While this may seem utopian, I envision designers as the ones questioning the status quo, re-examining the practices of past decades to homogenize, monopolize and dominate markets, and initiating change toward lifestyles lived in a more holistic, inclusive, sensitive, eclectic, empowering and sustainable manner.)

Design Gives Form to Dreams.

Need is the father of thought. I would like to think that designing and dreaming have travelled in lockstep since our species began to walk upright. In response to need and with nascent, ascendant dreams in their heads, designers have since earliest times given shape to the tools, environments, messages and experiences that define human existence.

Graphic design is finally coming of age. Born in the last century of mother Art and father Commerce (and so named "commercial art" in its infancy), graphic design has finally developed a sense of its own identity, along with an understanding of its role and responsibilities relative to society. No longer content with being the whipping boy of marketing, graphic design has evolved into a true profession and has adopted all that comes with it—best practice models, codes of ethics, certification standards and considered criticism. As the developed world has evolved from smokestacks to information-based societies and now an "age of ideas," the role of design has moved rapidly into the forefront of market economies.

Graphic design ignites passion, identifies, informs, clarifies, inspires and enables communication in our interconnected, interdependent, real-time world. Design shapes culture and it influences societal values. Designers act variously as surrogate dreamers, initiators, inseminators, creators of desire, propagators and propagandists. Never has there been a greater need for our design professions to dig deep, to exercise whole-brain (lateral) thinking skills, to understand channels of influence and patterns of interconnectivity, to join peer networks, to collaborate with other experts and to leverage the multi-perspective advantages of teamwork.

Seeing is Believing

Today is the tomorrow that our species dreamed of yesterday. Today is also the past we'll remember in the future—perhaps with nostalgia, perhaps with remorse. Although "design" shapes most of our modern environments, inputs and experience, the design professions are really only beginning to understand the significant role we play in forming the world around us. A cautionary note for those of us living in the developed world is that over the past few generations we have become disconnected and separated from nature—for the first time in human history we are living by clock and calendar rather than by sun and season.

We live in shared and increasingly interwoven stories. The Maori say, "We walk backwards into the future," recognizing that footprints we leave behind can actually inform forward navigation and future progress. Listening to the narratives of others helps pave paths to better understanding. Knowing our own past (and comparing our paths with those of others) allows us to celebrate achievements, learn from human foibles, redress omissions and correct our course.

Today, seeing *is* believing. We're told that 85 per cent of what we know nowadays is learned through our eyes. This means that as designers of visual language, we play a crucial role in society. The world needs us—and as information designers in an information age, we find ourselves in a position of considerable responsibility, whether we like it or not.

A Call for Collaboration

I have long been a believer in the value of synergism, the strength of camaraderie to bridge adversity, the vitality of collective processes, and the solidarity of common goals regarding design and our planet's mutual future. I remain convinced that our profession will continue to play a lead role in forming culture, influencing values and shaping the world. I know we can achieve more, be more effective and act more sustainably by sharing our ideas, giving voice to collective values and integrating synergies through our professional associations and as a part of the global design community. I have no doubt that we are capable of doing much more together than separately.

In this vein, I would encourage all designers to use creativity, voice and communication skills to make a difference. We can choose to deploy our powerful talents and propaganda tools to further understanding and build empathy, to nurture tolerance, to resolve conflict, to build respect for diversity and "the other," to expose injustice, defuse violence, promote peace, break down divisive barriers, counteract patriarchies, oppose hegemonic empires, alleviate despair, and repudiate fanaticism and fundamentalism of every kind. We have the power to expose the root causes of inequity, fear, despair and rage (the breeding grounds for terrorism). We can visualize long-term solutions, and we can use our unique mix of analytical and generative abilities to summon a sustainable response to looming challenges. We can promote harmony, raise the bar for civilization and civility, and above all, advance the characteristics that matter in making us truly "human" beings.

Isn't that exciting?

Robert L. Peters, FGDC, *is a graphic designer and the founding principal of Circle, a design consultancy based in Winnipeg. He is a former president of Icograda, author of Worldwide Identity (Rockport) and a Fellow of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada (GDC). (rlpeters@circle.mb.ca)*