The New Landscape of Design: Cool Hunting and Other Opportunities

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Introduction

Awareness of the value of good design is at an all-time high. Good design is recognized as a major differentiator in ensuring product success in a crowded global market and evidence abounds that more people in business or society understand that.

“Even Wal-Mart gets design, evidenced by a shift from everyday low prices to strategies to lure higher income customers more interested in value. Smiley bites the dust.” (Business Week, 2006)

Bruce Nussbaum, a design champion in his role as an editor at Business Week, speaking at the Design Impact conference at University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, in March 2005, proffered the view that design education lagged 10 years behind current practice. This paper explores the new landscape of design and what we might do about Bruce’s concerns.

Designers and Nondesigners

Designers have a tendency to divide the world into designers (people with a qualification in design) and nondesigners (everybody else). You can even participate in training seminars aimed at helping designers talk to non-designers. The impression is that nondesigners are the ones that commission, manufacture, use, pay for but often fail to understand design.

Whilst this tribal demarcation may be comforting, it is also misguided. Take an analogy with singing. The first named author can sing two love songs by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali—does that make him a singer? Yes, because sound comes out of his mouth. No, because it is sound not music, in other words it is not very musical. As a singer, one could be trained or untrained, amateur or professional, tuneful or tuneless, emotionally involving or execrable, or any combination of those characteristics. Any judgment of how good you are as a singer derives from the qualities of the sound you produce, and training in itself does not ensure that anyone will want to listen to you. Bob Dylan? Thom Yorke? Emmylou Harris? Trained singers? Possibly not. Accomplished singers? Yes, indeed.

So too with design. Whatever definition of design you subscribe too—form giving, problem solving, experience-shaping, opportunity-exploring, responding to user needs—it is impossible to argue that these activities are the sole prerogative of trained designers. Design, by any of these definitions, is a fundamental human process, engaged in by all human beings. Trained designers do not own this process, the best we can do is assert that we do it better, with the benefit of education and experience. Rather than just assert it, the onus is on us to prove it. The reason for this small-scale rant is that the new landscape of design is populated by many other people than those who are qualified designers. As good design becomes more important in business, it inevitably attracts more people. The veterans of the tribal wars in manufacturing companies over the last fifty years when the marketing tribe or the engineering tribe held sway, could be forgiven for regretting that the design tribes place in the forefront is somehow jeopardized. We have been invited to the party at least and now we have to play nicely.
“People now get what we do, but now people all think they can be designers. I heard Paris Hilton is coming out with a medical product.” (Butler, 2005) Of course, everybody knows they could be Paris Hilton, given the right body, relentless ambition, and care in choosing their parents.

The New Landscape for Design in Business

In *A Whole New Mind*, Dan Pink (2006) examines the different kinds of thinking processes that the brain is capable of. He characterizes left-brain directed thinking as being concerned with logic, analysis, numbers, science, and right-directed thinking as being about imagination, empathy, creativity, and poetry. All human activities utilize both kinds of thinking but in varying proportions. He contends that left-directed thinking, which has brought our society unparalleled economic and material prosperity is no longer enough. It has to be combined with right-directed thinking for this success to continue. He identifies three drivers for the future—Abundance (people have lots of stuff so become more discriminating), Asia (lots of labor working at lower rates than in the U.S.), and Automation (new ways we have of producing lots of stuff). Any process that is rule bound, or routine can be outsourced or automated, so our best hope for the future is to concentrate on processes that involve creativity, imagination, and invention.

The authors have seen Dan Pink present to both general audiences and audiences composed of designers and design educators. With a design audience one basks in smugness—“yes I was right not to go to law school”—and “now it's our turn”—but Pink always sounds a cautionary note—business has to learn the language of design but designers also have to learn the language, methodologies, and ethos of business. In case we become too complacent about rosy futures, remember that the grunt work in design—working out details, drawings, tooling, and so forth is perfectly suitable for outsourcing to China or being automated.

The new business model described in the pages of *Fast Company, Business Week, Inc.,* and *Wired* is about business being a creative process, attracting the best and brightest minds in the creation of products, services and experiences. Words like “buzz,” “mojo,” “delight factor,” and “products so cool, you want to lick them” are freely bandied around. It is about becoming a creative company with an appropriate creative company culture. Innovation and entrepreneurship are key. It is all as exciting as advertising in the 1980s, dot-com companies before the crash, and basketball (or baseball or soccer) all the time.

Design and innovation are inextricably linked. The emphasis in new business practice is on the connection between innovation and company culture, and on creating a design focused culture within companies. In this process, the role of design consultants is de-emphasized. There is more emphasis on the role of the CEO in driving innovation from the top down and supporting the organizational changes necessary for innovation to thrive, creating teams to do this within the company.

In the words of Alan Lafley, CEO, Proctor and Gamble:

“When I became chief executive, I had the opportunity to lead my personal crusade for design. In the past, our innovation process was sequential, and it usually started either with a consumer insight or more likely, a technology invention. We’d confirm the concept and product prototype, engineer the product, and then get design and marketing involved. Where we consciously involved design at the front end—such as with Crest Whitestrips, Olay Daily Facials, and our whole line of Swiffer quick-clean products, we generated more trial, more re-purchase, and more sales. Why? We delivered delightful consumer experiences. Design can unlock the technological performance we build into a product and
help the consumer see it, touch it. I’m not doing this because I’m a frustrated liberal arts major. Good design is good business.” (Lafley, 2004)

Tim Brown and David Kelley from IDEO coined the term “design thinking” to describe the approach that teams in business are now developing. The major focus of the new business thinking is actually quite simple—making customers happy, understanding their needs, satisfying needs they did not know they had and delivering the delightful experiences Lafley refers to above.

“Teams in business will be thinking about problems as design problems and tackling them like designers. Good design is the output of good design thinking, and companies will be looking to apply design thinking in many places where it hasn’t been applied before. These are the methods and approaches that designers use to solve problems, such as understanding and anticipating user needs, prototyping to evolve ideas, and using storytelling to bring ideas to life. If you look at things like the new d.school at Stanford, those kind of ideas are moving into business.” (Brown, 2006)

Following the pioneering work of IDEO, SmartDesign, and others, these business teams now include a broad spectrum of people—ergonomists, anthropologists, social scientists, theater designers, neuroscientists, programmers, and so forth.

“I specialized in film and video at school. I loved being around theatrical people because of their creative energy. My job was producing—learning to take all these wonderfully creative writers and directors and form that into a package where something could get finished. I remember taking classes where you’d have to write, direct and produce with a team. If I could be the one to understand what they were all doing, ultimately we could pull this project together successfully… Everything Frog Design does is team based. I use the exact same skills, only the stakes are higher.” (Lorenzo, 2005)

“Transitioning into business from a background in academia was difficult. There’s a certain amount of just acquiring the words in order to communicate effectively. The other issue is the pace. Science progresses quite slowly and you don’t talk or publish anything until you’ve checked, rechecked and double-checked everything. Business is the 80/20 rule: you can’t wait until you are 110% sure or you’ll miss the opportunity… now more than ever, companies have to understand human behavior in their effort to inspire customer loyalty. I can explain how brain and behavior are linked, how we take in and process information around us, and how that information motivates our choices. Companies are very hungry for that kind of clarity and insight. They can’t get that with the research techniques available to them.” (Foo, 2005)

What distinguishes these bright creatives coming into business from a nondesign and nonbusiness background is flexibility, problem-solving, opportunity spotting, communication skills (both telling and listening) and their ability to collaborate. The new landscape for design in business is based on the preeminence of the user and customer, and a focus on understanding customer needs, aspirations and desires is key. This is the impetus behind the development of new research techniques to get close to users, including ways for designers to get directly involved. Conventional market research has been found wanting.

Design consultancies such as IDEO, SonicRim and SmartDesign have employed research methods derived from anthropology and ethnography to study users in their own environments. User-centered, universal, inclusive, and participatory design, all involve users in the design
process, often collaborating directly with designers (Laurel, 2003; Langford and McDonagh, 2003). Though users may not have the solution to the design question—they offer invaluable access to their unique experiences. Kimberly-Clark is doing some very interesting work with their “consumer-cam”, a video and audio recording system which consumers wear on their heads to record themselves as they use products, finding it more natural to record their own behavior than being observed by a person in a white coat with a clipboard (Velazquez, 2005).

Another approach is based on designers developing empathy with users, which enables designers to simulate the behavior of others and gain direct insight into how to provide for them. A branch of this is cool-hunting—usually associated with using cool young people to get into the heads and habits of other cool young people. The heroine of William Gibson’s book—“Pattern Recognition” (2003) is Cayce—employed by advertisers and manufacturers to use empathy, observation, and intuition to determine what excites Japanese teenagers, London clubbers, or the participants in esoteric blogs and Web sites. Apple uses its student associates on university campuses in much the same way to gain intelligence about its customers and potential customers. The challenge for the future will be applying cool-hunting techniques in areas and with people not currently considered particularly cool (e.g., the elderly, Indian city dwellers, Chinese farmers, suburban Midwesterners).

Viral and word-of-mouth marketing are ways in which marketing and design are establishing different relationships before, during, and after the design process. *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) explores the development of popular trends, using the study of epidemics and contagious behavior as a starting point.

Providing systems that enable people to negotiate complex choices or to select from large amounts of information is now a major design opportunity. Search engines like Google, (resolutely visually simple whilst becoming ever more capable), content choice systems like Tivo and Pandora enable people to find the stuff they want to watch or listen to, whilst Amazon gets more effective at assisting people with purchasing choices. The other approach to excessive degrees of choice is to reduce complexity, to simplify our relationship with the objects and systems we use. It is estimated that only 10% of the functionality of devices like cell phones, cameras and computers is actually used, largely because the bloated feature count includes ones that we rarely use or cannot remember how to access anyway.

“Another important outcome was our new brand promise, which we introduced about a year ago—sense and simplicity. The promise underlines our conviction that relevance and ease of use are key concerns of consumers in choosing products. It represents a promise to make things that make sense within peoples lives, things that help them, in relevant and meaningful ways, get more out of life. And to make those things as easy to use and as accessible as possible so that life becomes simpler rather than more complicated. Sense and simplicity also serve as important touchstones for us, as designers, to help us produce only products and services that are consistent with and authentically reflect those values.” (Marzano, 2006)

The reason why the iPod is so successful (69% of MP3 player sales) is because it seamlessly integrates design, technology, and business by integrating capability and ease of use. Competent technology, great product design, an easy user interface, and access to legal downloading of tunes, podcasts, and video through iTunes. Who designed the iPod? Jonathan Ive. Yes, but no, the responsibility for the whole package is shared with Steve Jobs (CEO), Jeff Robbins (iTunes), Phil Schiller (marketing) and Avie Tevanian (software). An intriguing aspect of the iPod phenomenon is the combination of a minimalist design with an ever-proliferating aftermarket of
additions to enable people to get their iPods to do what the base device does not do—play in the car, fill your hotel room with sound, allow itself to be carried around, and resist scratches.

Although design innovation and entrepreneurship are inextricably linked, it is still unusual for designers to become entrepreneurs and manufacture their own designs. James Dyson is the striking exception. Having been involved in a series of design/manufacture activities (The Rotork Seatruck, the Ballbarrow) he developed the original cyclone cleaner following a frustrating domestic cleaning incident with a vacuum cleaner that sucked because it didn't! It took him 2000 prototypes and thirteen years before the design was ready for licensing. A patent infringement suit against a U.S. manufacturer, which had considered licensing, eventually gave him the financial wherewithal to set up manufacture, initially in the UK but now in Malaysia. Dyson is unusual for all that but also for his personal association with his designs and he is in the advertisements and his signature and phone number appear on every cleaner. He remains a great, but rarely emulated role model.

New manufacturing technologies also enable different relationships between designers, manufacturer, and consumers. The rise of customization, mass customization, custom manufacture—the whole range of just-for-me manufacturing possibilities will involve designers in providing the means by which individual consumer choice is exercised—providing tools not solutions. Access to global manufacturing resources, global marketing, and retail is greatly facilitated by digital technology and the Web.

Globalization is already impacting on design practice in a number of ways. Outsourcing manufacturing involves U.S. designers working with different cultures for engineering, manufacturing, designing for diverse global markets, interfacing with designers from different social, business and educational cultures in work situations both here and abroad. Design schools in China now graduate 6000 industrial design students a year. Design is already a global profession and will become even more so.

The final feature of the new landscape of design is awareness of environmental concerns. Global warming, population explosion, energy crisis and resource depletion are now familiar issues. Whether driven by changing consumer attitudes (Whole Foods, Toyota Prius, organic cotton) sustainability concerns (Herman Miller, Patagonia) or environmental legislation, embracing these issues is a major challenge, problem and opportunity for designers as for all of the Earth’s inhabitants.

**Challenges for Design Education**

As the landscape for design opens up, what are the challenges and opportunities for design education? How will design education develop in response to such challenges? There are far more opportunities to work in design related activities than were available to marker-wielders and CAD jockeys in earlier times. Chief creative officers, cool-hunters, ethnographers, strategists, viral marketers, entrepreneurs, brand managers—there is a whole spectrum of roles emerging. These roles can be located on a spectrum between the two poles of strategy and implementation.

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The conventional business model locates designers to the right hand end of the spectrum. There are examples of individuals who have successfully moved left-wards, contributing to the creation of this new landscape.

As a gross generalization, with apologies to innovative educators everywhere, industrial design undergraduate programs tend to be located on the right, concentrating on developing the traditional skill set of ideation, modeling, and rendering. Continuing to do this has become more difficult as the skill set expands to include CAD; as faculty numbers reduce and adjuncts disappear; and as the curriculum expands to include more general educational requirements; leading to the widely heard complaint that graduating students are not as well-trained or capable as they were in previous times.

At graduate level, the picture changes somewhat with design strategy and product development programs within the Institute of Design at IIT, the doctoral programs at Carnegie Mellon, Arizona State and North Carolina State, and also at Northwestern, Harvard, and the Rotman School of Management. The most far-reaching development is the design school at Stanford referred to previously. Many of the graduates in these programs do not come with undergraduate degrees in Design, contributing to the eclectic nature of these educational environments.

Developing Undergraduate Design Education—Key Directions

1) Developing design awareness in students of business and technology
The development of design strategy, product development and design management as central elements of business education have already started in the most innovative and farsighted business schools. Design educators have a vital role to play in developing design awareness, visual literacy, creativity, user advocacy in future business leaders. Innovation and entrepreneurship are already rooted there but we have to do this in ways other than exhorting people to employ more designers. Someone who has had their inner designer unlocked is more likely to relate to designers in an effective way.

2) Developing the business awareness of design students
To participate fully in the new business environment, design students need to be familiar with the language and methods of business, at all levels, and for all kinds of participation. For design students it will be imperative to concentrate on the buzz and mojo of creative business practice, rather than being served a diluted version of accounting 101. Organizational structures, product development, entrepreneurship, career planning, intellectual property, globalization would all be curriculum components. There are some of these elements that are present in existing programs but all would benefit from more development.

Design programs in universities will have the advantage of being able, in theory at least, to draw on the resources of other academic departments. Design programs in art schools will not have that advantage but will be able to tailor the curriculum components to suit the needs, inclinations, and abilities of design students. Overcoming the indifference of traditional business schools may prove a major barrier to collaborative development. Where their programs do not have research or project components, collaborations between design and business students at the same level on projects will prove challenging.

3) Developing research skills
The front end of product development is research based—into user needs, new materials and technologies, existing products and future markets. All design activity involves some research processes but these need to be expanded and elevated, particularly those relating to the understanding of user needs. Academic and scientific models are of limited value to designers, so we need to concentrate on the designer-friendly methods (McDonagh, 2006). Empathy,
ethnography, observation, scenarios, contact with users are all well-established approaches and methods that designers have found useful. Awareness of a wide range of research methods will be essential to foster communication within business teams. There are an increasing number of specialist research consultancies that provide strategic research data to design consultancies and companies.

4) Developing creativity
This is a mainstay of all design programs but we tend to concentrate on developing individual creativity, rather than developing our students’ ability to work with others in a creative way. This involves enabling and empowering other designers, collaborators, or product users to develop their own creative skills, or to work in a collective way. This is related to point 5) below. There are ways of working in other disciplines that may be helpful as models. Film and video production is an example of an activity where a variety of creative inputs have to be integrated although the Director-dictator model is not necessarily one worthy of emulation.

5) Developing collaborative skills
Much conventional design education is individually focused, most design practice is team based. Practice can be multi-person, multi-discipline or inter-disciplinary or any combination of all of these. Whilst a curriculum can contain information about team building strategies and assertiveness, it is much harder to offer project experience in multi-disciplinary teams within undergraduate programs. Finding interested collaborators at the same level is difficult, managing and assessing team projects is challenging. If such projects only serve to confirm prejudices about future members of the business or engineering tribes, the objective will not be met. However difficult, this is a nettle that must be firmly grasped, an issue that must be addressed.

6) Developing communication skills
In researching for this paper, it struck us to discover a significant number of designers who saw a narrative element to their work—understanding the user story, telling the product story—it is clearly an important part of the process. Communication skills involve listening as well as telling and selling, all of which directly relates to effectiveness in team situations. The conventional means by which designers communicate (drawings, renderings, models, and prototypes) still need to be deployed but written and spoken words, numbers and media presentations need to be employed as well, so students need to be fluent in all these.

7) Developing learning skills
Having a skill base upon graduation is no longer enough. It is essential for future designers to have the ability to learn new skills and adapt to changing environments. Learning to learn is vital as the means of expanding designers’ knowledge base.

8) Developing a wider range of career possibilities
If we only use the benchmark of how many of our students get jobs in design consultancies or design offices, we are not fully acknowledging or exploring the new possibilities that exist in the new landscape. To do justice to that range of possibilities, we need to be positive about the alternatives that exist and enable students to develop their individual career profile within design programs. Not one-fits-all, but just-for-me.

9) Developing global awareness
Globalization in all its forms will be an important feature for the future landscape for our students to occupy. Developing awareness of any empathy with disparate people and cultures will be essential, whether by language study, study abroad, orientations or contact with students from elsewhere.

10) Keeping it exciting
Designing needs to be challenging and rewarding, both a struggle and a delight, but also both pain and pleasure. It has to be both otherwise we would not do it!

**Conclusion**

The landscape of design has changed and more opportunities for conventionally trained designers now exist. We as design educators need to develop design curriculum in a way that embraces students from business and technology, whilst equipping our students with more business savvy. This will also open up further career opportunities for our own design students. Responding to this challenge is the way in which we address the concerns of design supporters in business and maximize the opportunity.

**References**

The first is a clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man. The Archaeological Landscape of the First Coffee Plantations in the South-East of Cuba, near Santiago, Cuba, is an example of this type of cultural landscape. The second type of cultural landscape is an organically evolved landscape. An organically evolved landscape is one where the spiritual, economic, and cultural significance of an area developed along with its physical characteristics. The Orkhon Valley has been used by Mongolian nomads since the 8th century as pastureland for their horses and other animals. Mongolian herders still use the rich river valley for pastureland today. The last type of cultural landscape is an associative cultural landscape. Design research is a way of testing and generating new thinking through the ‘iterative’ process of designing. In other words, the messy process of sketching, modelling and building prototypes becomes a design tinted lens, uncovering understandings that might not come to light with other research methods. Following this, each student’s design is summarised and key research themes expanded from their theses, binding the results of their individual investigations into one project. On the Edge presents a snapshot of master’s level design research, directed at the phenomenon of Glamping. Two giants of the natural gardening world, Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy, have collaborated on their best work yet. The book offers guidance for creating beautiful landscapes that will be durable and support life without sacrificing aesthetics. Essential for gardeners and nature lovers interested in sustainability. Although there are opportunities to reintroduce layers to such landscapes, the greatest opportunity lies in the suburbs, which are now home to approximately half of the United States’ population. Yield sustenance through edible plantings, produce opportunities for storytelling and other artistic expression.