The Undocumented Alien

by Gunnar Swanson

The Illegal Alien

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I'm always made nervous by disclaimers since I'm convinced they are usually evidence of a false claim that needs dis'ing. As a general rule, it would be better to avoid the false claim in the first place. I should, though, point out that comments on the way subjects and people fit in at universities need to be seen in light of the source, especially when they're from someone who apparently has a penchant for quitting university jobs. I should also point out that I am a graphic designer (in, I hope, a very broad sense of the term) and those in other design fields may find my comments on design to be somewhat parochial. I am also sure that my view of the world from the California coast colors more than my title metaphor.

"Reinventing design education in the university" brings up several questions. Are we talking about reinventing design or is design okay and we just need education to catch up? Is the problem in the last phrase—the "in the university" part? Is it that design and designers just don't fit well in universities? Does that mean that design or design education needs to change or that the university does? I suppose I'd answer "yes" to all of those questions.

One way that designers are a strange fit in many universities is our relationship with our subject. Some would claim that we don't really have a subject, that design is a practice contingent on other subject matter rather than a subject of its own. Others argue that we do have a subject but fail to treat it as such.

Ken Friedman has noted that designers would rather solve problems than understand them so we don't document our work and thus we are condemned to solve the same problems over and over. Friedman obviously wants to move us forward from that state but the hamster wheel approach is romanticized by some designers. A design professor I knew at UCLA twenty-five years ago (a niece of Eric Gill, by the way) used to pass out a photocopied sheet that told the story of Sisyphus on the first day of classes.

Lorraine Wild gave a talk at the 1997 American Institute of Graphic Arts

conference that I don't think should be dismissed as romanticism. In her talk, later published in *Emigre* 47 under the title "The Macramé of Resistance," she questioned two popular possible directions for graphic design education. One is what is often put forth as the "real world" approach where graphic designers are depicted as the visual arm of marketing and therefore graphic design students need to be taught to be serious servants of capitalism. In this model, typified, in Lorraine's view, by early editorials in *Critique* magazine, an understanding of business and marketing is more important for success than the arcane niceties of typography and negative space. She quotes Marty Neumeier warning of the relatively limited future for "The designer. . . who indulges in purely artistic pursuits."

The other up-and-coming direction was an approach of graphic-design-as-anthropology typified by comments of Michael and Katherine McCoy, promoting the designer as "interpreter of contexts." I'm not sure I buy the notion that thinking in terms of an audience's experience is the exclusive purview of anthropology (and some dismiss the Cranbrook legacy as a strange self-anthropology suitable for a book called *Coming of Age In Margaret Mead's University Office*) but Wild's point was that marketing and ethnology may be good perspectives from which to direct design but it's worth asking who is going to make the stuff getting directed? Design notions of craft and numinous object can easily get lost in the rush to be something more and better. What have we gained if the next generation of designers understands the context of design but isn't very good at designing?

I'm sure we can all agree that craft, technical skills, theory, critical skills, history, analytical reasoning of several different kinds, and breadth of education would all serve designers well, but if we're talking about four or six years of education, it starts to be like trying to put ten pounds of sugar in a five pound bag.

Does our appetite for objects that embody a point of view argue for a crafts approach to design and design education? Certainly some interesting projects in product design, corporate graphics, environmental graphic design, etcetera, have always been big team projects but web, interactive, and multimedia design require large work groups enough to make the single practitioner seem like an antique notion. They can also demand the participation of very different people with very different roles. Collaboration skills can be every bit as important as the stuff we would traditionally list under the heading of "design skills."

While adding some sort of collaborative skills to an expressive crafts design approach may seem like the way out, the political realities of large design teams argues for something more. The McCoys aren't the only ones talking about user experience. That phrase has been adopted not just by those interested in enhancing the richness of experience but by another group that is suspicious and disapproving

of aesthetics. These are the legions of Jakob Nielsen.

In July, Nielsen's "alertbox" told us about the end of web design but that was a bit of hyperbole. He did leave some room for web design. Specifically *"even if you always call search 'Search' and you always have the same way of distinguishing between simple search and advanced search, the question will remain whether advanced search makes sense for any specific site."*

and

"Content design will also remain. Each product description is different. Each opinion piece is different. There will always be a need to determine the best approach to describing each unit of information."

That's damned near it. Other than that, designers need to get out of the way of the efficient, standardized web. Lest any of us dismiss him as a mere crackpot, corporations seem to be lining up to pay his $5000 an hour fees (with a half day minimum) and in my experience, people don't cough up that kind of cash unless they intend to believe what they are told.

The traditional big design projects I mentioned before have tended to be done by teams led by designers but Nielsen's biggest admirers are often the people planning and running large web projects. What chance does a 22 year old with a sense of craft and a history of working well with others have of producing good design on a team run by someone who salutes humble pronouncements like "In the future. . .websites will be designed by my guidelines. . . for the simple reason that if they don't, they are dead"? What chance does a 24 year old with a love of form have of wresting control of the process from Puritans with a cause? The only people who can take control are the ones with a broad view of the processes—technical, affective, creative, and organizational—who can describe a vision articulately. No matter how persuasively Lorraine Wild extols the virtues of W.A. Dwiggins, Alvin Lustig, Imre Reiner, Corita Kent, and Big Daddy Roth, their personal visions might not have survived being directed by the information architects.

This is where the title of this talk—"The Undocumented Alien"—comes in. But first I should do some translation. One of the few Winston Churchill quips that was probably actually said by Winston Churchill was something about England and the US—two countries divided by a common language. (Or was that Mark Twain, the other guy who said everything clever?)

The term "undocumented alien" may seem to be a description of an extra terrestrial designed by someone who didn't heed Ken Friedman's advice but it's the official euphemism in the US for those who are more commonly called "illegal aliens." I'm told "illegal immigrant" is the UK term and that "over-stayer" is one of

the standard terms here in Oz. Anyway, I'm talking about people who are working in a foreign country without all of the required paperwork.

In much of the US but especially in Southern California (where I'm from), undocumented aliens keep us alive. We send armed patrols across the desert to keep them from crossing the Mexican border but if they all left the country we'd starve. There would be nobody running restaurants or picking and processing our food. The jobs that most directly effect our lives would go undone.

I don't know who coined the phrase "exotic menials" to describe graphic designers but when I used it in front of Saul Bass once he laughed and said "Well, we used to be exotic." If the analogy of campasinos from Oaxaca picking strawberries in the fields of Ventura County and the black-clad and tattooed corporate web minions doesn't seem apt enough, take a look at designers teaching in most universities instead.

Leaving aside any objections to my analogy as self-serving hyperbole, graphic design and multimedia programs are the food of many universities—the most popular courses of study and the draw for many students. They are typically kept going by the most junior faculty, often those with no real hope of being invited into the university community. They lack the documents—PhDs and papers in peer-reviewed journals—and the broader society often sees them as unworthy of inclusion even if they had green cards. (That's American for a work permit and, for those of you interested in color theory, they aren't green.)

In addition to the wrong pedigrees and limited proper publishing opportunities, designers have several cultural problems fitting into many universities. One is the assumption that design education is an oxymoron—that preparation for a design career is vocational training rather than education. I won't try to address that in detail right now. One approach is outlined in my 1994 *Design Issues* article, "Graphic Design as a Liberal Art."

The adoption by designers of traditional assumptions about the value and function of education is not the only possibility and it may not be the most politically expedient. It is worth noting that while many universities hang on to liberal arts rhetoric, that is objectively not their actual approach. Many prominent and respected undergraduate fields (engineering, for instance) and perhaps most masters degree programs are, at most schools, probably accurately described as vocational.

It would be a mistake to assume that there is universal respect across disciplines at most universities. Everyone knows that it would be a political disaster for a biologist to publicly announce her conviction that a social science approach to anything is a big waste of time or for a literature professor to announce his conviction that the entire business school is populated by philistines who get in the way of education.

There is, however, something of a common currency of peer-review publishing. An exception is made for art programs where curatorial judgement of work replaces publishing as a demonstration of status. Although much of the academy might secretly doubt the assumed political or social value of art, they know that comity and non-violent faculty senate meetings require not saying so.

Designers are usually left to the art exception but the mixed study and practice of many designers doesn't fit its often-narrow confines. And try convincing a group of painting professors that being in the ACD 100 show is better than hanging in a group show in the Omaha Community College art gallery. It would seem that carving out a space of our own is in order.

Many design educators see Ph.D. programs as our collective green card. This approach is not without its worries, though. Standards are, of course, a big question. Although some of the existing Ph.D. programs in design and related areas have produced interesting work, some of the established programs seem to most outside observers to be mediocre masters degrees with pretensions. The biggest problem may be a bureaucratic one. Many universities have a tenure-track teaching requirement of the highest degree in a field. Does a Ph.D. trump an MFA? When one could count all of the graphic design Ph.D.s living in the US on one hand and there are many hundreds of university design programs, where will faculty come from? Even if newly-minted design doctorates meet the demand, does that mean that designers will be trained by researchers rather than practitioners? What will that do to the current mixed study and practice that many of us participate in?

I believe that the increase in design scholarship is a healthy sign. It will be interesting to see what is, in the long run, embraced as the quality and subject matter expected of such scholarship. There may, in the end, be little agreement on that. Another area of professional practice as well as theory and criticism that comes to mind is journalism. There are some well-known and well-considered journalism schools where a few articles in the *Columbia Journalism Review* would get you a full professorship. There are others where you'd be advised to leave the non-academic stuff off your cv.

These are, if I can beat El Caballo Muerte of my title metaphor a bit more, the same problems immigrants always face. Is it best to try to assimilate, becoming as much like everyone else as possible, or to hang on to the old ways? In the end, neither really works, at least in the short run. The problem is to recognize that culture can neither be put on like a new suit nor preserved in a Mason jar. And, in the end, one's relationship with ethnic identity is idiosyncratic. I don't believe that it's romanticism or neurosis that makes me fear that preparing to lead the big, diverse teams and trying to fit in at faculty meetings might cause us to lose a bit of

who we are. There may be a design point of view that is foreign to both business and academia that is worth preserving. In fact, there may be several.

I'm not sure if this is laziness or if I've officially become old and pompous but I'm quoting myself. In a 1995 article about proposals for the certification of graphic designers I said "Standardizing graphic design is about like standardizing dance or fishing. It may all go by one name, but it's not the same thing. Please explain to me why anyone thinks Charles Spenser Anderson, Shiela de Brettville, Josef Müller-Brockman, Art Chantry, Ed Fella, Tom Geismar, April Greiman, any senior designer for Walter Landor, Scott Mednick, Paul Rand, Deborah Sussman, Rick Valicente, Rudy Vanderlans, and Massimo Vignelli are all in the same business. The strength of graphic design is in its diversity."

Imagine how broad that list would be if I'd been looking beyond graphic design and not addressing an American audience. I'm hoping we never think we've found the formula for design education, in the university or anywhere else. But in deference to Ken, I do hope we document our tries.