

Is Design Important?

by Gunnar Swanson

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DESIGNERS AND DESIGN EDUCATORS SPEND MUCH TIME AND ENERGY talking about developing public awareness of design and how to gain recognition for design. We rarely ask whether design is important.

Imagine for a moment design education without the promise of a job as a designer. The idea seems every bit as stupid as dental school without the promise of fixing teeth. Neither dentistry nor graphic design is important unless you have a toothache or need your product promoted. However, we consider other areas of study to be worthwhile whether or not they lead to careers as, say, psychologists or historians.

Could studying design be of general, not just professional, interest? Do we really have anything to offer outside of the sometimes questionable promise of a job? If we answer no, it is because we underrate the potential of our field. Design is at an intellectual crossroads where anthropology meets communication studies, art meets marketing, and cognitive psychology meets business. It is in the position to become an integrative educational field, a liberal art for the next century.

From the time of Aristotle through the nineteenth century, the liberal arts were a set of studies that defined a generally educated person. They comprised the range of knowledge of humankind. An educated person could know, at least

in outline, what was know in all fields of study, but this is no longer possible. In the mean time, liberal studies has often come to mean an approach to education that can be likened to ordering from the menu of a Chinese restaurant—one from column A, one from column B, etc.

It is time to reexamine our notion of general education. One approach is a “liberal arts” program that centers on subjects that involve integration of the traditional areas of knowledge. Design could be one of them, a place where manufacturing meets philosophy.

Wouldn't such a change in emphasis in design teaching cheat students of professional training at a time when entry into the field is harder than ever? Working designers struggle to stay on top of a changing vocation. Vocational training in times of rapid change will almost certainly be out of date before the training is completed. Learning how to keep learning should ever student's primary educational goal.

It has become a cliché of career counseling to point out that most of today's jobs won't exist in fifteen years and most jobs that will exist in fifteen years don't exist now. We can expect the statement to remain true, although the time period will shorten. Although there may be graphic designers in fifteen years most of them will likely be doing something very different from the present vocation of graphic design.

The design students of today will be the inventors of the design field of tomorrow. A general education is more conducive to the flexibility needed for such invention than is vocational training with its narrower concerns. A general education focusing on the concerns of design—form and meaning, vision and understanding—would serve our next generation of designers better than what we now offer them.

I would like to think that we assume that a design student would benefit from studying anthropology. Then the leap I am asking for would be consideration whether an anthropology student could benefit from the study of graphic design. I'm afraid we have farther to go than that. Although rhetoric about general education is widespread in the design field, I have observed a distinctly anti-intellectual streak in many design teachers. In the mid 1970s, an industrial design teacher of mine told me I was “too articulate” and that great design happens when designers have no other way of expressing themselves than with form. Paul Rand, perhaps the best known living graphic designer and design educator, wrote that a “student whose mind is cluttered with matters that have nothing directly to do with design... is a bewildered student.”¹ Clearly many design teachers and many design students see “academic” classes as time stolen from their true purpose—the design studio.

Rand is hardly alone in denial of “matters that have nothing directly to do with

¹ Paul Rand, *Design, Form, and Chaos*, 1993 Yale University Press, New Haven CT and London, 217

design.” This attitude places design education clearly in the realm of vocational training and assumes a stable list of things that do have something directly to do with design. Clearly such an assumption should not be made. Many designers are naturally suspicious of the idea that the study of design might inform other areas of study; after all, very few academic studies have direct value for design. We are doers, not theorists. The empirical evidence is that design and “ivory tower thinking” have little in common, but it is the fact that graphic design is not part of the mainstream of academia that has marginalized design’s interests. For instance, it is not surprising that most studies of type and comprehension seem irrelevant to designers’ concerns since designers generally do not participate in such studies.

The interests of the design business have traditionally driven design education. It is time to reconsider whether that is really in the interest of design education, design students and, for that matter, the design business. The pace of development of the design business has, in the past, allowed for the kind of consideration and analysis that a maturing field needs. The current changes in design leave little time for practitioners to reflect and that is unlikely to change. That room to grow could be provided by design studies that are independent of vocational concerns. Without such a balancing force the graphic design business is in trouble. With it we could discover that design is, indeed, important.

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