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Designers as Facilitators of Change

The days of the celebrity solo designer are over. Complex systems are shaped by all the people who use them, and in this new era of collaborative innovation, designers are having to evolve from being the individual authors of objects, or buildings, to being the facilitators of change among large groups of people. (Thackara, c2005)

The complex systems that Thackara refers to are a fact of our modern life. Ecological, social, cultural, economic, and psychological (awareness) problems interact and are dynamically interrelated in the current crises of our unsustainable civilization and according to Thackara, we have *designed* our way into many of the troubling, multi-faceted, and complex systems we find ourselves within today.

Even with modest UN projections for population growth, consumption and climate change, humanity will need the capacity of two Earths by 2030 to absorb carbon dioxide waste and keep up with natural resource consumption. (Pollard, 2010) The economic downturn that began in 2008 gave us a sobering indication of just how connected the global economies actually are. Through travel, the internet, telecommunications, and through the global networks of finance, trade, and commerce, we are more connected today than any previous human civilization.

Collaboration amongst stakeholders in any given problem, be it local, regional, national, or global is essential and facilitating that collaboration is increasingly going to fall on designers' shoulders. In 2002, the UK's Design Council published its Annual Review and released statistical information that showed that 80 percent of the environmental impact of the products, services and infrastructures that surround us is determined in the design stage. (Design Council, 2002) Design decisions shape not only the aesthetic form of the products and communications we interact with on a daily basis, but also the processes that exist beyond surface-level interactions. From the materials and energy that go in to creating them, to the processes involved in disposing of them when we are finished, designers can and do play a vital role in the entire life-cycle of the products, services and communications we interact with. There is no doubt that designers have played a role in getting us *in* to our current state of affairs, but no designer ever set out to destroy the planet. We may be guilty of short-sightedness, narrow focus, or perhaps even an emphasis on the aesthetic properties of our creations over their sustainability, but in fairness, we have only recently been told, along with everyone else, how incredibly sensitive we need to be to the possible consequences of our actions.

If design helped us get in to the situation we currently find ourselves in, it can certainly help us out of it. Designers have an enormous capacity for problem solving. Verily, it is at the heart of what we do. Design, by its nature, is a problem solving activity. In *Design is the Problem*, Nathan Shedroff writes:

Successful design is careful and considered. It responds to customers/ users/ participants/ people, market, company, brand, environment, channel, culture, materials, and context. *The most successful design* is inseparable from these criteria. *The*

most meaningful design is culturally and personally relevant, and we respond to it on the deepest levels. The best design also has a future. It is sustainable. (Shedroff & Lovins, 2009)

For designers to be *facilitators of change*, and to collaboratively move towards *successful and meaningful* outputs, we must begin with their education. We must look at the processes they are being taught to use, and the contexts they are being tasked to work within if we are going to empower future generations of designers to focus less on the aesthetic and marginal applications of their work and to shift towards devising solutions that consider the ecological, social, cultural, economic, and psychological impacts of their existence. In other words, designing more *sustainable* solutions.

In a 2008 volume of the journal *Design Issues*, Daniel Christian Wahl and Seaton Baxter discuss the designer's role in facilitating sustainable solutions.

Design can most broadly be defined as the expression of intentionality through interactions and relationships. At the *downstream* end of this process our cultural artifacts, institutions, patterns of production, and consumption express intentionality materially. *Upstream*, in the immaterial dimension, the "metadesign" of our conscious awareness, value systems, worldviews, and aspirations defines the intentionality behind materialized design. (D. C. Wahl & Baxter, 2008)

Wahl and Baxter go on to discuss how cultural, academic and professional perspectives are all shaped by the intentions, aspirations and basic assumptions that inform them. Sustainability offers up a perspective that looks at the larger context in which designing occurs. Awareness, values, and aspirations influence the *why*, *how*, and *what* we design.

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