



What's Changed—Besides Everything

The evolution of the communication arts

It's the tail end of the Nifty Fifties—and I am twelve. My hometown of Metuchen, New Jersey is an antebellum bedroom community for the metropolis of New York. We never lock our doors and my mother rarely knows where her kids are, except at suppertime (SPAM or Velveeta cheese and elbow macaroni, Baked Alaska for dessert—yum!). Everything's

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freezing! General Dwight D. Eisenhower is our 34th President and, boy, do ‘We like Ike!’

America just weathered a recession and the Dow Jones has shot up over 600 for the first time ever. My little sister got *Eloise* for Christmas, a book illustrated by Hilary Knight for “precocious adults”—about a little girl who lives in the Plaza Hotel. We have a Chevy Impala one of the hottest cars on the road: Just look at those fins! Pop, in suit and tie, takes the

changing; you can feel it! We're so modern with our 17" black-and-white RCA TV with three networks to choose from. On Sunday evenings, our family watches *The Ed Sullivan Show*. But Pop warns us kids to first “hotten up the tube” because it takes awhile 'til the CBS Eye comes into focus.

We don't need a telephone operator to place our calls anymore; we can dial directly anywhere in the USA! You can hear the Soviet's satellite Sputnik overhead if your radio is tuned to the right frequency, and soon there will be a man in space but he will be Russian, not American. Although we're really most nervous since the Ruskies now have the bomb: The Cold War is on and it is

train to Rockefeller Center each weekday, brings home the *New York Times* each evening (cost: five cents). In the lobby of the Forum Theatre on Main Street, I can't help but stare at the bold, abstract poster for Otto Preminger's newest movie *Anatomy of a Murder*, designed by Hollywood commercial artist Saul Bass who designed the film's titles too. It's so different looking! And a new magazine called *The Journal of Commercial Art* just launched in California.

Fast-forward 50 years. Who knew we would all become multitaskers: connected to technology each and every waking moment, unable to function without our iPhones, WiFi, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Maps, Netflix, Skype, Twitter, Photoshop, eBay, iTunes, Tivo, 40" Organic Light Emitting Diode (OLED) televisions with 2,000 stations, computer-run shavers, cameras and hybrid cars (although the American auto industry, one of the few remaining major manufacturing industries left in the U.S., is tanking)? We know where our kids are each and every minute of the day: Only after we punch in the code in our ADT security systems may we all go to bed. The operators we're talking to on our cell phones are in Mumbai (in 1959, Bombay).

Recent innovations like the VCR, pager and fax machine have already become obsolete. And some inventions never saw the light of day—like the vacuum cleaner that would have run on nuclear energy.

The Journal of Commercial Art became *Communication Arts*, CA for short, in response to a changing profession. Saul Bass would be considered a graphic designer, were he still with us. And designers are often considered “exotic menials”¹ since design is largely undervalued. American Institute of Graphic Arts, in the struggle to redefine and rebrand itself, unable to make a major change to its name, and so has become just AIGA.

The environment is collapsing. The market has plunged from its record high of nearly 14,000. The U.S. economy is in a deepening recession. And a new war, one with no apparent end, is on—the war on terrorism. African-American Barack Hussein Obama, at 47, is our 44th president. He talks to us weekly via the Internet. We can respond online with our

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ideas: He wants to know what we think. More change is in the air; change we must believe in.

CA: reflections of change

A flipbook of the intervening half-century of CA annuals confirms that the communication arts (photography, illustration, design, advertising) provides us with mirror images of our world: An America shaped by Civil Rights struggles and gains; political assassinations and disgraces; the tragedies of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars; the exhilaration of the Space Race; the fall of the USSR; mini skirts, go-go boots, tattoos and body piercings; Woodstock and the Summer of Love; eruptive markets and horrific natural disasters.

And in the last 50 years America has itself become increasingly more diverse in its work force. We have seen a massive sophistication and general awareness of our design, photography and illustration techniques, technology and styles. Design, and its component parts, has emerged from obscurity to enter the lexicon of the layman. There has been a huge change in the complexion of the communication arts professions; it's morphed from a cosmopolitan, larger-than-life, white male monopoly into a diverse tapestry of talent, gender and ethnicity woven across our entire country, for richer or poorer, for better or worse.

Roger Whitehouse, Whitehouse & Company, New York, NY

Roger Whitehouse, budding architect and graphic designer, lived in London in the late '50s. He says, "Europe was devastated after World War II. We were too young to really experience the war, but we saw the aftermath and the opportunity to build a better world. Technology was making amazing things possible and it was up to us to shape the future. We were given the task to create a whole new universe of things that had never existed before. We were absurdly idealistic. We were contemptuous of history tearing down everything, particularly the omnipresent Victorian architecture that we considered decadent and a symbol of the bad old times. Form follows function was our mantra. Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe were our gods and the Bauhaus was the altar at which we worshipped. Ours was a socialistic proletariat movement to end poverty and the class system. We were going to make the world egalitarian. We had a real sense of mission."

Considering the evolution of his own design philosophy, Whitehouse, who moved to New York in 1967, later starting his graphic design firm, Whitehouse & Company, says, "I'm still a minimalist at heart. Organic design—the shape of things should flow from the way they are used and perceived,

From Angst to Zen...



LEFT: ROGER VAN DER WEYDEN. DETAIL FROM THE LAST JUDGMENT, 1434. PHOTO: ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY
RIGHT: AKSHOBYA BUDDHA. TIBET, 13TH C. PHOTO: THE NEWARK MUSEUM/ART RESOURCE, NY

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a subtler interpretation of the philosophy that form should follow function.

“The concepts behind layouts and visuals in magazines and ads from years ago are still very fresh when we look at them today. A lot of clarity: Simple, brilliant and witty.” But speaking about the current state of design Whitehouse feels differently, “I find many graphics today profoundly noisy. I see a lot of visual gibberish. It’s smartass—hard to make head or tail of it. The *New York Times* is one exception; it’s easy to appreciate their approach to communication.” Despite its universal acclaim for substance and style, and still considered

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—Ellen Lupton

the “paper of record,” the *Times* (which now costs \$1.50 weekdays), is caught in the vortex of a failing newspaper industry, and is in desperate financial shape.

Whitehouse helped to evolve the professional practice of graphic designers for many years through AIGA. And though conservative in his design approach, Whitehouse was a radical in the early ’80s—becoming one of the first designers to embrace the computer as a design tool.

“Our profession has changed dramatically. There was a sense of nobility in the old days. There were icons like Ivan Chermayeff, Tom Geismar and Massimo Vignelli producing wonderful design. There was a sense of magic in what designers did—people were in awe of us. People’s perception of visual design has totally changed because of flashy media with PC programs that can make anyone feel they are a designer in three easy steps.

“We are bombarded by graphics now. The more you can stimulate the senses, as fast as possible, the better. People have been conditioned to be attracted to noise—gyrating and spinning, pop and flash. It’s destroying our visual sophistication. The power of the subtle statement is in danger of being forgotten.”

Ann Willoughby, Willoughby Design Group, Kansas City, MO

Ann was fourteen years old and living in Mississippi in 1959. “We got *The Saturday Evening Post* delivered to our house each week. Oh, did I wish I could draw like Norman Rockwell! And when I saw fashion magazines like *Vogue*, I felt like they came from some far away place. Cars were fashion too. Cars were big and their sleek impressive bodies changed every year.

We used to play a game as we drove called ‘what make, model and year car is that.’ Cars meant freedom. You could start driving at fourteen in the rural south because kids were needed to drive trucks and tractors.

“Civil rights was becoming a huge polarizing issue in the U.S. It’s hard to even describe how much has changed since then. Social justice and the Cold War were issues we confronted every day. Part of me was interested in boys and fashion and part of me was searching to reach my moral grounding. I remember the revolution in Cuba in 1959, when Castro came into power. During the Bay of Pigs in 1961 we came very close to a nuclear showdown. I thought, ‘They’re gonna get us.’ Our neighbors had a bomb shelter. It looked like a big tin can. It had everything you’d need in case of an attack.

“My first job in design was in college, still in Mississippi. I was hired by the Waldorf Department Store. There was a Waldorf store that catered to white people and another one that catered to black people. I was responsible for all the identity (what we now call branding) and visual merchandising for the white store. It was a great experience because I integrated the advertising, the windows, the packaging. I illustrated and designed and wrote copy (in the spirit of Lord & Taylor). They gave me a lot of freedom to do what I felt was needed. I worked with rubber cement, hot type and Rubylith film to create mechanical art boards. They’d cast the metal plate that night and I’d see the ad printed the next day. It was immediate and satisfying. I learned on-the-job for three years. It was a much more significant education than college was for me.”

Willoughby, who moved to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1968, says, “There were art studios that provided services like illustrations, layouts for the advertising agencies, but there were no design firms in Kansas City until the ’80s. Fortunately, I started going to the Aspen Design Conference in 1972 and that opened up a whole new world for me. I saw architecture, product and graphic design as something integrated and much more powerful. So when I started my studio in 1978, it was a very different kind of studio for Kansas City. It reflected my new thinking about design and collaboration. In that same spirit, I’ve traveled a lot more than most designers during my career. It’s been important to experience the world firsthand in order to inform my design approach.”

Willoughby, who is in leadership at AIGA, says, “I remember having a cab driver ask me what I did a few years ago. ‘I’m in design,’ I said. ‘I love InDesign,’ the cab driver replied. And he started to tell me about InDesign.” She laughs. “Everyone is a designer now. When everyone knows the names of typefaces, that tells you something. People feel they can design anything from their own letterhead to their shoes to their own home. And what’s exciting is how this is reflected in the

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profession: The silos are breaking down—marketing, design as well as concerns about sustainability are becoming integrated in projects. This is an opportunity for designers skilled in systems-thinking.”

She also sees that expectations about productivity are taking their toll. “I see people very stressed because they don’t have time to develop their work properly. And it’s much more competitive because there are 4,000 percent more people in the profession these days. Graphic design has been the most lucrative area to go into within the arts. We continue to have a world of problems and opportunities waiting for the next generation of designers. Today, everything is design.”

Sean Kernan, Sean Kernan Studios, Stony Creek, CT

“In 1958 I was in boarding school in Connecticut reading Jack Kerouac while the teachers urged us to read Hemingway: Kerouac was my rebel. I’d drag race our family’s Chevy with its big tail fins. My mother, who saw herself as a gourmet cook, made tomato aspic molds, which I hated, and things with Jello.

In the late ’60s, I took a camera to Europe and it took me over. It was right after the movie *Blow Up* and it was hip to be a photographer. I wanted to disappear like Cartier-Bresson into India for months; saw photography as something to practice immersively. I did my first job for *Look* long before I was really competent and thought, ‘That was easy,’ and also worked for *Life* but then both went under. So I segued into commercial work but always kept my personal work going.

“Support for photojournalism got narrower. The opportunity for a long discursive story has now dried up but people still want to do this and the work can now make its way into the world through the Internet, since bandwidth has improved.

“Still photography played a big part in exposing the horrors of Vietnam, but photography has been largely disallowed during the Iraq/Afghanistan wars—the exposure is too threatening and our government is too aware of what photography can do now. The skills of commercial photography have improved a lot and there is still exciting work being done. The best stuff is always in CA.

“Young photographers come to me and say, ‘I want to do what you do.’ What they mean is ‘I want this romantic idea of photography—jetting off to Africa.’ They don’t realize I support my personal work through my commercial work.

“In the commercial world, the process is really collaborative. The roles of photography, design and illustration have become blurred. And there are more bean counters now focused on driving the costs down. The business is fear driven, which moves us towards making things that are predictable. What clients don’t realize is being creative doesn’t necessarily cost

more. The exceptions are those people who have an understanding that they were hired *because* they have a strong voice.”

Ellen Lupton, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore MD

Lupton, who, at 45 had no direct experience of the late ’50s, says, “The discourse today is much younger. Design flourished as an experimental avant-garde language in the ’90s and it’s swung back to function and transparency, universality. Designers don’t talk about critical theory or multi-culturalism now as they did in the ’90s because design innovation is focused on technology now—that’s where the energy of the field is. A huge argumentative community has become focused on Web standards and usability—and that conversation has replaced the dialogue about critical theory that used to be the intellectual maelstrom of creativity among younger designers. Designers used to be interested in taking control of content, creating complex typography as a form of expression—I’m thinking Ed Fella, Allen Hori, Kathy McCoy. But design’s more function-oriented now. It’s not about aesthetics or philosophy. And it’s not very sexy. Social media is not about visual experimentation: It’s about systems, not about beauty.

“Print media is going to become less and less important. The writing is on the wall and we have to face it, the future is going to be more and more Web-based. More screens, less papers.”

Lupton wrote a controversial book encouraging a broader audience to “design it yourself” called *D.I.Y.* in 2006. She says, “*D.I.Y.* spoke to young people—designers as well as non-designers. Older designers balked. Telling people to design their own business cards was repulsive to established designers. Yet I feel the value of design needs to be explained not just to the CEO but to everyone. Graphic design is now part of people’s consciousness because they have more access to the tools and vocabulary. There is sex appeal to graphic design. It’s permeated product design, products which are covered with graphics these days.

“Sustainability is a huge challenge and its tough to be a designer and answer those questions about saving the planet. After all, there is pressure to make less stuff, and making stuff is what we have historically done. Yet abstinence is not a cure: Societies need to make stuff in order to have active, prosperous economies. Design has a role to play in shifting the balance but, to date, our role has been negative in the sense that it has added to the ecological burden. We need to develop new systems that will help people to prosper.”

Tucker Viemeister, Rockwell Group, New York, NY

Industrial designer Tucker Viemeister, famously named after the Tucker automobile that his father, also an industrial

designer, helped design in the 1940s, lived in Ohio (and attended the experimental Antioch School) in the '50s. He recalls spending time with his father, "We'd go see the new cars before they came out. It was like a fashion show. I remember in 1958 my dad thought they were ugly. That marked the big schism between popular design (flashy, Las Vegas, neon) and our kind of 'good design' (modern, rational, clean, functional). Plastic should look like plastic. It shouldn't pretend to be something else. Style was a derogatory idea in the 'good design' world.

"Our whole family was into design. My mom wore Marimekko and read about gourmet cooking and how to stretch meals (making creative uses of leftovers) in the *Ladies Home Journal*. She would sew dresses using *Vogue* patterns for my sisters and make dad and me matching ties with the leftover fabric.

"Design was on a crusade to improve everything; all the designers were on the same page. Now there is many criteria for 'good' design with lots of variety. There is an unfortunate disposability to design today.

"But the economic shift we are in is stunning the whole world. In the '50s we thought that in the future robots would do everything. We'd all be rich, have lives of leisure. So the Chinese have been the 'robots' making all the stuff and now they are rich.

"The idea in America has been to be the 'knowledge workers'—branding, marketing—but you don't need a whole country of knowledge workers. What is everyone else going to do? Play professional sports? Or bag groceries? We can get to Utopia but we need to reconsider the economics. A new system needs to support the distribution of wealth."

Reconsidering our options could change our future

If the attraction of design is reflected in the number and variety of books published, then the interest is staggering. Yet design is not even a category on the store information kiosk at Barnes & Noble. Lee Stern, the store's art buyer, says, "You have to know what you're looking for or just wander into the Art section and come upon it. Within the Art section you'll find a clearly defined section for Graphic Design. A separate section of the store, called Computers, has a very large sub-category called Graphics and Design." It's made up entirely of books that instruct how to use design programs, including InDesign. Perfect for Willoughby's cabbie.

But of the Art section, where most books about design are, Stern says, "The primary buyer of graphic design books is the design student and young professional designers." Stern, who is very impressed by the sheer numbers of design students out there, says, "This category has exploded since the mid-'90s; there are just a lot more visually-oriented people in the world

today. In graphic design it's not so much about the name—there are just a few iconic heroes, there are no author speaking tours—the interest seems to be a general overview of graphic design, design ideas, street art, graffiti."

As a very young designer in the early '70s, a Parsons graduate, I believed (and had been taught) that design could change the world. And that designers could do anything. In fact, I limited my social life so I could better focus on my work. I was terrified of forgetting something; there was so much to cram into my brain that who had time for parties? I worried that I might become overwhelmed with so many options. Now we know that the unconscious mind has two separate systems: emotional and rational and they are in constant competition. Having too many variables crashes the rational system so it gives in to the emotional, which can be a real big calamity. I maintain my balance by avoiding super stores touting five aisles of mustard options and by only shopping in one clothing store: I suffer from a disease of modernity called "choice angst." I'm protecting my rational system from the threat of perpetual overload—a threat we are all faced with these days.²

Design can make a difference in establishing a new equilibrium in our lives

The Obama White House has opened the door for design to help affect change. Unlike previous administrations, President Obama welcomes the integration of scientific/artistic thinking. Viemeister, who worked with the Clinton Administration on the formation of a design council which ultimately failed, says, "They were looking at designers as a distinctive profession as opposed to problem-solvers [which we all are, potentially]." Obama made his first move by hiring Sol Sender to design and maintain his breakthrough campaign brand system in which harmony and inspiration were key goals. Viemeister recalls that "France's president François Mitterand hired Philippe Starck to redesign his private apartment, to change the perception of his presidency as lively and fashionable." The next move for the Obama Administration must be to lead government and industry to follow suit, to use design to show the world a more courageous, authentic America. As Whitehouse says, "It's up to us to shape the future." Change we can believe in. **CA**

Author's note: All design professionals quoted have contributed to the Design Issues column, which is celebrating its nineteenth anniversary this year.

Notes

1. A title widely attributed to Ralph Caplan.
2. Radio Lab *WNYC*, Choice, 11/18/08.