

contemporary design: designers seeing the contemporary

History has always organized art and design into defined periods, from Industrial to Modernist, Constructivism to Deconstructivism to Post-Modern. But where are we now? What is contemporary design?

The Design Channel posed this question to many designers at the American Institute of Graphic Arts' 2002 National Voice Conference held in Washington DC. We focused on four renowned designers, Pat Taylor, Burkey Belser, Ken Garland and Beth Singer, and discussed their views on contemporary design, history's role and where we might be headed in the future. TDC conducted individual interviews, however, they are presented here by topic area for a greater opportunity to compare responses.

Pat Taylor is owner of Pat Taylor Inc. and a professor at the Corcoran College of Art and Design. Burkey Belser, an Information Designer, is responsible for the nutrition label placed on over 6 billion domestic products that are reviewed daily. Ken Garland is a graphic designer and writer from Great Britain and Beth Singer owns Beth Singer Design in Arlington, Virginia.

The Design Channel: So, what is contemporary design? Where are we in the vast spectrum of -isms? As expected, answers amongst our four designers varied, however...inclusion of historical references, how they relate to the "now" and comparisons to past movements were prominent.

Pat Taylor: Contemporary design is the last thing that you did and something that you're going to be doing. Things that you're working on at the moment, things that you are working on tomorrow perhaps, the very last project you did. That to me is contemporary design.

Burkey Belser: Well, contemporary design is my discipline. So it's difficult to answer what it is beyond that. I think certainly one of the things that happened in the past ten years, which is not completely new, is a break down. You can no longer see a movement through time where one movement replaces another design movement. In fact we've seen that the mirror has shattered and fragments of design movements are now strong, moving in parallel streams. So, design has become very individualized as a result of the post modernist movement and the deconstructionist movement that followed it. That Deconstructionist movement opened up parallel, alternate routes for people to take. Which I think is really interesting, Very, very personal styles. Graphic design that is used for personal expression, as I mentioned earlier, is very new versus graphic design used in this traditional form for corporate expression.

Ken Garland: I've been in the business for about fifty years now, and it's changed enormously of course. But what I've come to realize over this period is that it's a short period in what in fact is a very long history. Later in life I've become interested in our ancestors who were doing graphic design before there was a written language. The highly sophisticated graphic art of the pre-historic caves is what now excites me. And in it, I recognize us.

I recognize that people were doing what we're doing now. They were looking for ways to entertain, inform and instruct. It's a much longer perspective than I've ever contemplated before. And that changes my view about where we are today.

Beth Singer: My preference is always to deal in the commodity of ideas. So if something is freshly presented, that's contemporary enough for me. I can't remember who I heard this from but I was sitting in a lecture hall and the speaker said, "When you successfully blend innovation and tradition it's a very powerful kind of design." People can relate to the traditional part and then they can take that traditional part and extrapolate into the innovative part that you've injected into it. Somehow they understand the message and it becomes that much more powerful because you haven't done the same old thing and you have also given them a point of reference to get the innovative part out of it. So for me, that's contemporary design.

TDC: In your opinion, what are some of the characteristics, trends or goals of current design? Where do you think the contemporary movement fits in the history of design? How is it unique?

PT: History; I think there's a great deal to learn from history. You can use the past in developing the future. It's a wonderful idea to invent something that has never been invented before. Discover something that has never been discovered. I think a lot of this is based on the past, what came before us. Every minute that passes—this is contemporary coming up. To me, everything is always changing, everything, every minute! Again, know the past; know where you're going. I can't be any clearer than that.

BB: A multiplicity of styles. You get people who cling to the modernist movement, people who still cleave to the post-modernist movement, David Carson, and people who are creating their own individual styles. It seems to me that it's very difficult to create heroes in this environment. There are so many designers working today. I don't know what the numbers are, but surely there are two and a half times as many designers as there were twenty years ago. So a modernist movement would occur where you had giants like Paul Rand and you had Push Pin Studios which was a "push back" against the modernist movement, before the inclusion of more illustration. I don't think you're going to get monolithic movements anymore. At least, I don't see it happening in the short term. That fragmentation of design is going to continue. Although, design is getting more sensible.

KG: Four years ago, I built a series of lectures on the history of graphic information at a university course I teach in Mexico every year. I changed my mind about so many things when I was in the process of teaching these courses. The work of our predecessors' thirty thousand years ago is as contemporary as the work we do now. I came to this view, surprisingly. I hadn't held it before, and then I found myself looking at the art of ancient Egypt, Syria and Summeria, and at the art of the middle ages and saw more and more correspondences with what we do now. I think that after we've come out of the miasma in which we sink ourselves with our love of technologies will we realize technology is only a tool like the scribe's tool or like the mysterious tools used by the cave artists. They're only tools and we shouldn't be hooked on the magic. The magic is in us, not in the tools.

BS: If you want it in a more traditional, straightforward definition, [contemporary design] is probably design that's "affected" by technology. Maybe that's not my definition, but that's probably the definition you're going to get over and over again. If you're asking how it fits into our history, art history, I think it's a wonderful blending of social history and art history. We have these new and different tools and we've had them for the last, let's say ten years, in real practice. And we're using these machines and new technologies to create what we

definitely couldn't have created before. At first we used the machines to duplicate and replicate what we had before, just in a faster, more efficient way. And now, we're actually taking it and using the technology to go way beyond what we could have done without the technology. So, it's a fascinating place in history. As designers we're going to look back at this time and know that this was the beginning of the technological movement in civilized nations and all of design is going to reflect that.

TDC: How do you see yourself falling within contemporary design? Are you impressed with any specific colleagues who are driving today's design into the future?

PT: I would like to see more of David Carson's stuff. He seems to be hiding from time to time. I don't think I've ever read anything that he did but I certainly have looked at everything. I'm from the school, where, if I can't read it, I'll move off of it, I'll leave it. But his work is still very exciting and there's a lot there to pick up in the future. I still admire, if you will, the old timers. The people who back in the fifties and sixties gave us a name. To me, they're still inventing the wheel. I should give you a name—Milton Glaser is still hot, up to the minute. He's a real trendsetter. He doesn't probably believe that, but I do, very much so.

BB: I grew up in the time period where Milton Glaser was my hero. So that's where my heart still lies but I think, having incorporated a lot of those movements in my work, what I do best is a simple, strong, powerful image. That to me communicates the most powerfully. And I think that Luba Lukova's work is crystal clear evidence of that. That which is simplified, that which is full of emotion, whether it's for a product or a cause, it communicates.

TDC: Are there specific strengths, influences, resources that you can point to that have enabled you to succeed as a contemporary designer?

BB: An absolute devotion to typography. A passionate devotion to typography. A passionate devotion to the message, to getting it right, whether that's stopping it short and saying that's good enough. Those are some of the values that form what I do. Having a goal, and knowing what your goal is. We were talking about this with several other designers recently, being able to toggle back and forth from the macro to the micro, big to little. Many young designers that I work with in my studio have no idea how to do that. But that's absolutely critical in being able to create design. What's my major goal and how does this tiny piece of what I'm doing fit into that...major, minor, major, minor. That kind of toggling is very important.

BS: I could name you a whole bunch of artists and designers that I'm influenced by, but truth be told, I think that my education at RISD is something that influences me everyday. I use everyday what I learned from there. I feel like a commercial! They taught us to be master problem solvers and the problem solving methodology we employed was very diverse and very strict. They taught us there are many ways to skin the cat, and we experimented with all of them. Today I feel that my biggest strength and the strength of my firm is in conceptual development. The exploration of various solutions to the clients' problems, not just one solution, but various ways to communicate the objectives of the problem the client gives us. And so, I can't say enough good things about my education. I will say that the type of methodology being employed can influence people in their everyday lives. I find I use that problem solving kind of methodology to solve other kinds of issues in my life. And so it's been a wonderful thing to have the process of problem solving.

TDC: What other disciplines do you find influential, what role should they have?

PT: Drawing, it's becoming a lost art in schools. They don't draw anymore. They sit in front of the computer. If I had my way at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, all four years the students would sketch and draw; not to become famous artists but just to learn how to communicate ideas. One way is to draw thumbnails or roughs. They're not very good at it anymore. The old timers are, that's all they ever do is sketch, and then they produce. The production tools that are available today are fantastic but if you don't have an idea, they're not worth any of it.

KG: What is going to push us forward, I think, is not our increasing skills, if indeed they are increasing. Nor our greater powers, if in fact we have greater powers. What's going to push us forward is a greater identity with other creative people. We must get closer to artists, to architects, to poets, and writers. And I serve as being as much a writer as much as I do a graphic designer. I see this much more clearly than perhaps my colleagues do. I believe we must reintegrate. It took long enough to carve a special place for us in the last century and the beginnings of this century to make a claim to be special people. Now, I think we can relax. I don't think we need to make our case quite so stridently. I was one of those who was a strident spokesman for our budding profession, and now I want to feel that we belong to a wider spectrum once again. Including the political and sociological spectrum. I don't want to be a different person, actually I want to be more closely integrated with my community. And that's the way forward for me and perhaps for younger people.

BS: Interface design, I really think that the design of our tools that we're using is going to have the biggest influence over what and how we communicate in our discipline. Other things influence us, I'm not saying architecture doesn't, or industrial design doesn't. But you asked me for the biggest influence and I think it's definitely interface design.

TDC: The introduction of the computer has been a relatively recent phenomenon, how do you find it impacts design and specifically your work? Is it helping to propel design forward?

PT: I think it's helping it, but I don't think it's doing any pushing as far as I'm concerned. I think it all comes from up here (points to head) and once you did it up here there are many ways to produce something. The computer is one of them. By the way, I don't own a computer. I have followed it for years since I started 49 years ago. I buy everything except for the idea. I don't own a printing plant, I don't make paper and I've never set type, although I've talked about it.

KG: How do I respond to current technology and the changes we are confronted with? My answer is that I respond reluctantly, under pressure, but in the end with satisfaction. I've seen the introduction of computers in graphic design over a fifty-year period, obviously, and I'm now a friendly user of a friendly machine. But it didn't come easily. I wanted to know what that machine had to offer me. And I saw what it was offering some people, which was an illusion. And it wasn't until I realized the indispensability of this sort of technology that I based it. So I'm a conservative in this respect and highly non-conservative in many others.

BS: I'm very happy to have all the technologies but in my mind it's a bottomless money-pit that I have to pour money into to keep technologically current, constantly educate myself. And I feel behind when I'm the stupidest one in the office when it comes to all the technologies and I'm more and more reliant on my staff because of technology, because I can't do everything. I can't keep the clients, run the business, figure out the pension plans, do the hiring, and get the business. So, I'm not the master of many things in the firm anymore. So as far

as being in a small business, I don't know how it affects being in a large business. In a small business it's a blessing but it's also a curse.

TDC: Where do you think contemporary design is headed in the future?

BB: It's simplifying the complete self-absorption of Deconstructivism design where nobody cared if you could read anything—that was whether it was a magazine or advertising. Designers at the time didn't care if you could read it or not. So it's six-point type that ran sideways and up and down that was common. But that's a foolish, foolish...that's not a commercial design mechanism. That's art. And a corporation shouldn't have to pay for that unless they're commissioning it as art.

KG: What do I think of where we're going? I think some of the statements made at this conference and at other conferences have come to suggest to me that we have an overweening attitude towards what we do. We come to think of ourselves as more powerful than in fact we are. Graphic designers and people in the visual communication business are not powerful, they are the recorders, the entertainers, and sometimes they're part of the instruction of an operation. They are so often (that they don't recognize it) the servants of their masters and seeking to take mastery of what we do is only partially successful. We're only successful when we revert to being artists, poets, revert to taking a long view of the situation and step outside the immediate requirements of our clients. Bless them, they're so necessary; they do confine our imagination. It's a reluctant decision I've come to. I presented myself as a craftsman, a humble craftsman for so long. It took me a long time to realize I really could be more than that. I want to have the same magic in work and life that our predecessors who made the wonderful cave paintings of thirty thousand years ago had.

BS: It might level off at some point, but no time soon. We're on this escalator zooming towards the future right now. And those kinds of things go in steps where you've got a huge jump in the way people use the technology and the way the technology develops, but we're definitely on the upward swoop right now. In fact, I think there's amazing opportunities and challenges for designers in general right now. Almost everything you touch that has to do with being a citizen here in the United States and functioning on a very basic level, is really up for grabs right now. And I think we have a great challenge ahead of us. Now we have other challenges we need to think about; issues of recycling and issues of saving the environment and how design can help that. There are all of these issues we haven't thought about yet and they'll be here in the next ten or twenty years. So we have to expand our definition of how we can contribute as designers.