WHAT GOES ON A SIGN?

Dan Friedman
Radical Modernism
Gabriel Drozdov
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Dan Friedman
Street Shoes, shopping bag, 1979
An appropriation of
street sign iconography
for a commercial product.

LIKE MANY ASPECTS of society, design is in a state of crisis. It is a profession born of idealistic notions about the quality of human-made objects and environments, but it has been losing a sense of purpose to prevailing values of commerce. Functionalism, universality, and timelessness, once the hallmarks of modern design, no longer seem adequate. Social injustices, economic recession, uncertainty, intolerance of difference, and diminished resources have encouraged a regression toward a comfortable nostalgia rather than a radically new response. Shifting priorities and state-of-the-art digital technologies are driving a wedge between old and new generations. The difficulty of distinguishing between the natural and the artificial is obscuring traditional criteria of beauty and authenticity. Both artists and designers, working as if they were from separate planets, are seeking a sense of balance and optimism in a world apparently moving toward either cultural conformity or increasing chaos. All of these factors create tremendous confusion especially for students entering the visual arts.

Party Express
2022 New Year's Glasses, glasses, 2022
A pair of party glasses
letting you look through
into the new year.

HOW ARE THEY to respond at the end of a millennium to conditions that too many people indicate the end of history, the end of nature, the end of art, and the end of humanism and reason? I am devoted advocate of change , but I am not so skeptical about our condition. While I relish the idea of multiple realities suggested by "postmodernism," I find the pronouncement of the end of modernism premature and reactionary. Just as I began in the 1960s to question the rigidity of an orthodox modernism, in the 1990s I find myself questioning the divisive jargon and anarchy of those who suggest that modernism is smoothing we must overcome. I have worked to redefine functionalism and at the same time supported attempts to shake things up radically, even if those experiments trifle with anti functionalism. I acknowledge cultural imperfections, tensions, and contradictions, yet I believe that modernism still evolves as a rich project of inquiry. The connections that once gave continuity to our visions are coming undone; the new question is not whether the ambition for continuity still makes sense, but what ideas we will assemble and how we will relate them to each other. Radical modernism is therefore presented here as a reaffirmation of the idealistic roots of our modernity, adjusted to include more of our diverse culture, history, research, and fantasy.

College of Arms
King Charles III royal cypher, logo, 2022
A combination of a symbol (crown)
and text ("CR III") representing
the monarchy's continued reign.

I HAVE CHOSEN to define my position as that of an artist whose subject – design and culture – affects all aspects of life. This means that design has turned out to be not so much my career as a way of expressing, confronting, even struggling with dramatic personal and social changes. I have been first and foremost a practitioner who advocates aesthetic quality. As the following pages will show, my pursuit has produced a body of rather diverse (yet homogeneous) work over a period of twenty five years, marked by excursions into various disciplines and often motivated by design theories and cultural issues. Throughout this time, in whatever area of specialty, I have willfully maintained the perspective of an outsider. My goal in working in the "margins" has been to find a fresher view into the center of things. From this position, I have questioned the values we now use to distinguish between art and design, the public and the private, the domestic and the institutional, in an effort to visualize a modernism based on a radical reconception and an optimistic new agenda.

U.S. Department of Transportation
Electric vehicle charging station, sign
A recontextualization of an icon
for gas vehicles to denote charging
stations for electric vehicles.

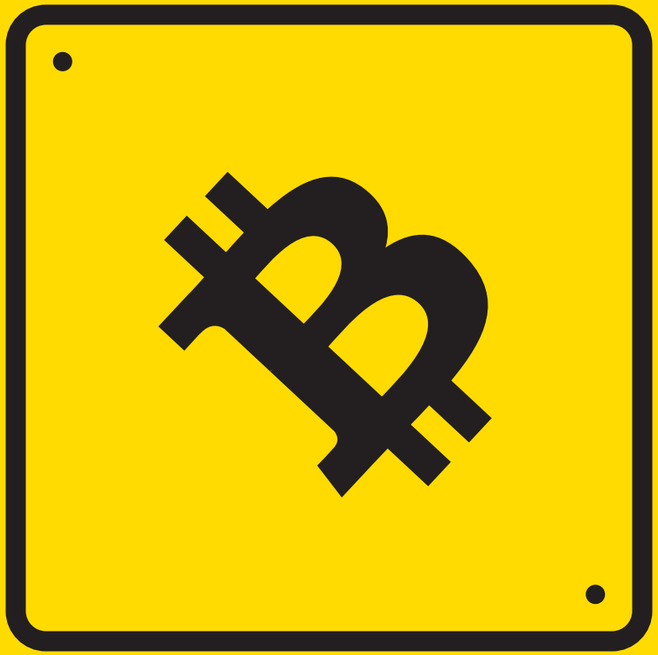
THERE WAS A time when designers were cultural visionaries leading society. They spoke of a visual landscape enhanced by artistic quality, inspired by new techniques and concepts, and created to promote a sense of liberation and enrichment. In its infancy, design was tied to the ambitious aspirations of art, architecture, and technology. Many modern designers (such as William Morris, Walter Gropius, and R. Buckminster Fuller) extended this ambition by seeing design as part of a mission that embraced considerably more than isolated issues of technique and style. Even though monolithic views of culture have proven to be impractical and the aspirations of industry have prevailed more often than those of art, design is still inspirational when it evokes the spirit of idealism and radical cultural change that was fostered by early modernism.

Dan Friedman
ART AGAINST AIDS, poster, 1987
A bold typographic poster
aiming to bring a community together
to fight a devastating epidemic.

THE OBSTACLES DESIGNERS now face in maintaining idealism are innumerable and well known. Undercurrents of disaster and fear have surely had a subliminal effect on the way we design or value our lives, our culture, and our environments. For example, my birth only days before the first atomic bomb was deployed must have left an imprint on my imagination. The chances of nuclear apocalypse may or may not have diminished with the ending of the cold war, but there are always new demons to fear. The world crisis of AIDS, crime, terrorism, "ethnic cleansing," environmental devastation, and massive financial deficit are the newer "bombs" that threaten to destroy us. Dystopia has become an integral part of culture, and through the medium of television it has entered our homes and become a part of every domestic landscape.

TiVo Corporation
TiVo, logo, 1998
An anthropomorphic television representing a product that lets you record your television.

THE RADIANT ENERGY of television has effected a profoundly new kind of electronic space – a human made environment that delivers a continuous barrage of illusion, urgency, intensity, simulation, and violence. It electronically transports us through space and time. As Marshall McLuhan suggested in the 1960s, it alters everything from our sense of color to our sense of community. The accessibility, diversity, and random juxtaposition of televised information makes everything equally important and unimportant. Television is blinding, plumbing, addictive, seductive, and toxic. It has prepared us to be sucked into a new kind of hyperspace – an electronic city that is radically new in structure and that could never have been conceived solely by architects or designers.



Bitboy
Bitcoin, symbol, 2010
An icon for a virtual currency that appropriates the design language of physical currencies.

DOES DESIGN HAVE a visible impact on every aspect of culture or is its influence minuscule? If one equates "design" with products that are the result of styling and expediency, then it can be considered pervasive. However, there is only marginal evidence (on television or in "real" environments) that the civilizing aspirations of an art-based but user-friendly design play an important role in the culture of America. Urban design is less a reflection of designers' vision than of the complex compromises made between real estate developers, bankers, contractors, community boards, and politicians. Similarly, product designs are typically formulated by marketing experts, corporate strategists, computer analysts, cost accountants, merchandisers, and media consultants. Aesthetic, humanistic, and pragmatic innovations remain an isolated "luxury" and a diminished priority, often replaced with designs that breed confusion or worse: alienation, fear, indifference, envy, or exhaustion. This is hardly an antidote to the violence, greed, pain, loss and prejudice already suffered by many members of society.

Ryan Bugden
RISD seal, logo, 2022
A typographic refinement
of John Howard Benson's design
for the Rhode Island School
of Design.

MUSEUMS (AND SCHOOLS) have not yet substantially made their contributions toward integrating design into the context of our rapidly evolving culture. Their old distinctions among art, design, crafts and decorative arts do not still provide a satisfactory logic. Some museums have spent the last thirty years frozen in earlier conceptions of modernism and are confused about what is now important. Certain archetypal objects of design (such as posters) are still collected, celebrated, and envied even though they have become a diminished aspect of what designers now actually do.

Dan Friedman
Citibank, logo, 1975
A wordmark and abstract icon
that represent a bank.

DESIGNERS HAVE DEDICATED themselves so entirely to the private sector that the public realm, cherished in other times and places has languished. A preoccupation with aspirations of business has made design overspecialized and resistant to becoming a more engaging part of a larger culture. Design, like society at large, has suffered from a vacuum of inspirational leadership. In the last decade, and perhaps for much of the modern era, a correlation has become apparent between our quality of life and the powerlessness of designers to contribute to the public good. There is already evidence, however, that the 1990s may see a reemergence of designers with a more determined social conscience and an understanding of the words pro bono public. Moreover, our marginalized position may inspire us, like artists, to function once again as cultural provocateurs.